

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MASK AS A CRITICAL TOOL FOR AN
EXAMINATION OF CHARACTER AND PERFORMER ACTION

by

MARY ANNE MITCHELL, B.F.A., M.F.A.

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PREFACE

A fairly substantial body of research has been developed on both the history and the function of the mask in the theatre. The historical development of the mask is well-documented, although this documentation is widely scattered among numerous sources, all of which treat the mask only as part of a broader historical overview of theatrical development. Research concerning the mask's emergence as a dramatic convention is much more limited and is generally restricted to its dramatic function only in the Modern theatre. Perhaps the most extensive research has been generated on the mask's function as an acting convention. Recent studies in the area of acting have examined the mask as a fundamental principle at work in all acting processes. Most recently, those investigating the mask's role in the acting process, as well as a handful of others attempting to provide a theoretical basis for contemporary performance practices, have begun to analyze the mask's function as a performance convention.

Historical documentation of the mask as a theatrical--or physical--convention is quite complete through the Italian Renaissance; however, after this point, historians tend to dismiss the mask as a significant theatrical convention until its brief resurgence again in the anti-realistic movements of the early Modern theatre. Because so little is actually known concerning the early use of the mask, much historical research on its development as a theatrical convention is of a highly conjectural nature.

Analysis of the mask as a dramatic convention centers around the idea of character as a mask, or as a series of masks, which conceal successively deeper human realities. While many modern playwrights, such as Luigi Pirandello, have been instrumental in developing perspectives on the dramatic character's function as a mask, other theorists, such as Michael Goldman, have attempted to analyze the implications for the performer of this approach to character as a mask of actions.

The Modern theatre's exploration of the mask has naturally lead to studies concerning the role of the mask in the acting process. In particular, Robert Benedetti, John Harrop and Sabin Epstein have examined several approaches to acting from the point of view of the mask as a means of transformation. From the point of view of the performer, the mask is also considered to develop as a pattern of actions.

Much of the information concerning the mask's development as a performance convention comes directly from those who, in the last seventy-five years, have experimented with the mask as a medium for conveying the performer's action. While the impetus behind such experimentation has varied with each theorist, the common goal of these experimenters has been to discover new ways in which the mask can function to project action. Most recently, there have been a few attempts to examine the use of the mask in contemporary actor training programs, and such studies verify its growing importance within the contemporary performance process.

Despite the large body of research which has been developed on the mask, there has, as yet, been no attempt to study the evolution of the mask as a convention for the projection of different kinds of action. This study investigates the various conventions which have evolved from the mask and attempts to demonstrate the manner in which each of these conventions projects action, either in terms of the play as a whole, in terms of the character, or in terms of the performer.

The term "convention," as it is used in this study, refers to the significant emergence of an element whose function is widely accepted as necessary and natural within the context of the theatrical experience. Theatrical elements which function in this manner usually require the distance of time for their distinctive recognition as conventions. Robert Cohen considers the theatrical convention to be the seventh component of theatre--the first six being Aristotle's elements of plot, character, thought, diction, melody and spectacle.

Each play sets up its own system of conventions, but in most cases they accord with the traditions of their times and therefore go largely unnoticed (doubtless that is why Aristotle, familiar with no drama other than his own, made no specific mention of them). In modern times, with playwrights and directors becoming increasingly aware of other traditions and possibilities, more and more play productions seek to employ conventions of ancient times or foreign cultures, and even to establish new ones.¹

Throughout the development of the theatre, the mask has functioned as a convention. Most fundamentally, the mask's conventional function is to project action.

This study will demonstrate that the mask's capacity to project action is predicated on its ability to formulate different kinds of

dialectical tensions. The kinds of tensions generated by the mask vary according to the different kinds of conventions. The nature of the particular dialectic is also responsible for determining the kinds of actions generated by the mask.

Chapter I of this study examines the development of the mask as a theatrical tradition. It traces the evolution of the mask into different kinds of conventions which correspond to different stages of theatrical development. The mask as a theatrical convention is investigated historically, while the mask as a dramatic convention is explored from various Modern critical perspectives. The mask's development as a performance convention is investigated in terms of four major contemporary theorists: 1) Antonin Artaud, 2) Jerzy Grotowski, 3) Bertolt Brecht and 4) Richard Schechner. In Chapter II the mask is examined as an acting convention. Its role in the development of characterization is analyzed in relationship to the four conventions discussed in Chapter I. Chapter III explores the mask's essential function as a gesture toward character. It proposes that the mask as action has consistently functioned to project a quality of character. Conclusions drawn from the study are presented in Chapter IV.

The pretext for this investigation of the mask reflects a need to come to terms with the way in which character and performer action are related through the convention of the mask. It is hoped that this study will generate a body of theory which can then be explored within both the classroom and the production process.

Notes

¹Robert Cohen, Theatre, (Palo Alto, Cal.: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1981), p. 33.

CHAPTER I

THE MASK AS THEATRICAL TRADITION

The mask has long been a symbol of the theatre; its iconic function can be traced to its traditional development as a variety of conventions for the projection of action. The tradition of the mask as a theatrical--or physical--convention is long and varied; it spans the entire history of the Classical theatre. As a theatrical convention, the mask has developed differently in each of the major Classical periods, although in all periods, its primary function has been to convey an objective image of character action to both the actor and the audience.

The subsequent development of the mask as a dramatic convention was a logical outgrowth of its function as a theatrical convention. As a dramatic convention, the mask continued to be the principal means for projecting character action, though in a much more complex and subtle manner. Through his manipulation of dramatic elements, in particular the element of thought, the dramatist was able to convey character as a mask of actions. The dramatic mask projected character action from both an objective and subjective point of view. The dramatic mask's subjective expression of character action required greater creative co-operation from the actor.

The mask's development as a performance convention was the consequence of several convergent factors. The most important factor influencing the mask as a performance convention was the emergence of the performer as the primary creative element in the theatrical process

and a pervasive desire among theatre artists to explore different ways in which the mask could be used to project action. The various experiments with the mask as a performance convention were prompted by the need to discover how it could project the action of the performer.

The Mask as a Theatrical Convention in the Greek Theatre

The tradition of the masked performer goes back far earlier than anything recognizable as tragedy or even as drama. The custom of mask-wearing began as part of the ritual associated with primitive dance. In these primitive rites, the mask was an object of veneration. It was revered as a "means for attracting or embodying the spirit to be controlled, consulted, or propitiated. [The mask was also] used to represent an animal to be killed or as [an aid] in bringing about desired events."¹ The masked performer of primitive ritual valued the mask's potential for transformation.

The mask was not originally used as a means of personification, but for the exaltation of the individual and to reveal the power of the god captured in its very essence. An analogous sense of mystery is the prime emotion of the animal mask, where the individual or group wearing the mask assumes certain qualities of the beast itself, qualities also inherent in man but suppressed under normal social conditions. In dance and in ritual, these submerged qualities are allowed to surface, as everyday life is forgotten and the marvelous takes over.²

The significance of the mask associated with primitive ritual was essentially its capacity to effect change. The change brought about by the wearing of the mask manifested itself not only within the wearer, but also outside--in the world he contacted. The primitive mask allowed one reality to be supplanted by another as it granted its wearer the power and freedom to perform unconventional acts. The

impulses which prompted these unconventional acts were rooted in belief rather than knowledge. The mask continued to retain its efficacy as a means of unconventional transformation when it later developed into a significant institution in the mummeries connected with Bacchic worship.

The old comic actors, before the invention of the theatrical mask, used to smear their faces with wine, or cover them with fig leaves. Masks were worn in the processions of Dionysus down to the latest times. The Latin peasantry, at their Bacchic festivals, used to cover their faces with masks made out of the bark of trees.³

The masks used in primitive ritual were characterized by a dichotomous combination of elements; the mask itself was made from natural materials, yet it was granted supernatural powers. As a device of transformation, it enabled its wearer to transcend one reality and experience another reality of his own creation. The acts associated with early mask-wearing, though they were unconventional in nature, were efficacious in purpose. They were performed to effect change.

Evidence suggests that the theatrical mask was not, as one might expect, a natural development in the evolution of the primitive, religious mask. The dithyramb, from which tragedy is thought to have developed, did not use masks. Thespis, the first Greek actor, is traditionally credited with inventing the mask around the fifth century B.C. Historic accounts hold that Thespis experimented with various kinds of masks before he devised the primitive form for a theatrical convention which would eventually come to symbolize theatre in general and the art of the actor in particular. "Thespis, so Suidas says, first smeared his face with white lead, then he 'over-shadowed'

his face with a sprig of purslane [a trailing weed], then he devised a mask of linen."⁴ His linen mask was plain and unpainted. While much is known about the physical nature of the first theatrical masks, there is very little agreement as to the motive behind its invention.

All theories as to why the mask first came to be used in the Greek theatre are speculative. Scholarly opinion is generally divided along two lines of thought concerning the introduction of the mask as a theatrical convention. While one group of scholars argues that the mask was created to meet the purely practical needs of the Greek theatre, another group views the mask as a convention ideally suited to the aesthetic demands of early Greek drama.

Those scholars who suggest that the origin and development of the mask was essentially an aesthetic phenomenon object to the theory that Thespis invented the mask merely as a means of disguise; instead, they hold that the theatrical mask cannot be divorced from its ritualistic heritage of mysticism and magic.

This story completely ignores or bypasses one of the primitive uses of masks--that of striking terror or awe into the hearts of any audience by the presentation of an inhuman and static head on a body that is human and moves. Masks have been used for this purpose since the beginning of human consciousness, . . . Witch doctors and mystic dancers alike . . . have found this sort . . . of identification of supreme use to endow their movements with a sense of unearthliness. A mask can hold an audience spellbound, shocked or mesmerized; such qualities could not have been unknown to any actor at any time.⁵

As further proof of their claim, these theorists point out that the Greek comic mask was as terrifying in nature as was the tragic mask.

Other historian-critics conjecture that the Greek mask, because it was invented by an actor, was intended to serve the needs of the

actor. They suggest that early experiments with the mask developed from a desire to personify the spiritual aspect of the characters portrayed onstage. They further hypothesize that the actor viewed the mask as an incarnate presence of the character he was portraying; accordingly, actors and playwrights made changes in the masks to accommodate new character needs. This view holds that after Thespis developed the linen mask, the next developments made by Choerilus were changes only in Satyric masks. After the time of Aeschylus, there is no evidence of any radical alterations or improvements in the manufacture of masks.

As Thespis at first used white lead, then purslane, and finally a mask of unpainted linen, his "make-up" was very ill-adapted for representing Dionysus, Silenus or Satyrs. On the other hand the pale white colour was well suited for the representation of heroes, whose ghosts might be supposed to appear, like that of Darius in the Persae. It is easy to prove from Aristophanes that to the ordinary Athenian the proper colour use in the representation of one who had come back from beyond the tomb was white. It is clear that the fit colour for a revenant's face was white and this Thespis could effect. . . . On the other hand to have represented Dionysus with the pallor of death would have shocked his audience.⁶

It may be assumed that this group of theorists would further extend their hypothesis to explain that the next development in the mask--Aeschylus' invention of the tragic mask--was also a necessary outgrowth of new dramatic needs.

Another group of historians view the origin and development of the mask from a somewhat more pragmatic standpoint. They argue that "masks may have magical or religious associations; that is of no interest to us."⁷ They believe that the mask was invented to resolve a diversity of theatrical problems.

[Masks] were clearly invented by Thespis . . . for . . . purely theatrical reasons, and remained in vogue because they were wanted. They suited both the theatre and the drama: the theatre because it was so large that the natural human face would be only a brown blob to most of the spectators; the drama . . . because [it] avoided purely individual traits or purely transient moods or emotions.⁸

Finally, another Greek historian, who believes that the development of the mask was analogous to the changes in the function of the dramatic form, suggests that the mask was essentially a device which provided each new formal element with definition.

If Thespis' contribution to the history of the theatre was that he "invented" the first actor, by using direct speech to present one character at a time, the process of the actor's development was one of reduction from the narrative function of bard or chorus leader. At this point the mask would have most likely been introduced not only to subordinate the personality of the narrator to that of the character, but also so two or more characters might be imitated in quick succession. Dialogue between characters was of course impossible until Aeschylus' use of a second actor, and the chorus initially provided the character's immediate audience. Thus the chorus, acquiring a personality to respond to the actor, would also have needed to assume masks. The personality of the chorus was essentially corporate, not individual.⁹

This final statement, concerning the group identity of the chorus, would account for the single, standardized mask used by the tragic chorus in Greek theatre. Finally, the question of origin is considered from a contemporary point of view to be a pragmatic solution to the conceptual difficulties encountered by the ancient creators of theatre. From this perspective, the mask is considered to be a device for distinguishing between the character and the actor.

How was the audience to distinguish the "real person" from the "character" portrayed, between the actor-as-himself and the actor-as-character? Especially when the playwright was himself an actor. The ancients had to resolve the problem of actor-character separation before the theatre could become a firmly established institution. The solution

the ancient world found was the mask. . . . Basically the mask is the tool of impersonation, at once hiding the face of the performer and projecting that of the "character" demanded by the play.¹⁰

As a tool of impersonation, the mask is considered to be a convention which enables the actor to separate himself from a particularized communal identity in order to become a symbolic image of a more universal condition.

There is no doubt that, in practical terms, the mask greatly facilitated the unique problems of the ancient theatre: it permitted several characters to be performed by a single actor; and it enabled the male actor to create female characters in an effective manner.¹¹ At the same time, the mask well-served the aesthetic considerations of both the dramatist and the actor in what was essentially a presentational form of theatre.

The mask as a convention projected the presentational objectives of the Greek dramatist. As Peter Arnott points out, a "greater degree of detachment is normal in the presentational theatre where character is revealed by externals . . . rather than by inner motivation."¹² The Greek dramatist was not concerned with presenting a present-time reality--his characters were mostly drawn from Greek myth--nor was he interested in representing life in all its diversity; rather he "wanted to present a conception of the principles or forces that operate in life."¹³ Because the Greek dramatist was "concerned not with the individual in his own right but with 'the realized type,' the mask was able to convey just as much as the dramatist wished to convey in depicting the persons in his play."¹⁴ "Prosophon," the Greek word for mask, also means face, aspect, person and stage-figure

(persona); from the Greek point of view, the term "mask" was broadly interpreted.

We should allow mask and face to draw semantically close together and then we should enrich the face far beyond our own conception, until it is able to embrace (as it did for Greeks from the time of Homer) the look of a man, together with the truth about him.¹⁵

In their development of dramatic character, consistency was the most important aesthetic principle guiding the Greek dramatists. This aesthetic was set forth by Horace in his Ars Poetica and was strictly adhered to by early Greek dramatists.

Since the dramatic action was confined to a single day . . . at the culmination of the story, it was rarely possible for dramatis personae to experience any particular change or development of character during the course of the play. This fixity of type was not only a natural result of theatrical conditions in ancient times and of the use of masks but was also in thorough accord with Homeric conventions.¹⁶

The Greek poet, Homer, also counselled the dramatist "to keep the character to the end of the play as it was at the beginning and let it be consistent."¹⁷ Certainly the static nature of the mask was in concordance with the Greek aesthetic principle of consistency.

Several scholars, including Peter Arnott and Francis Cornford, have contrasted the Greek dramatist's conception of character with that of the modern view of character. In his comparison, Arnott concludes that audiences "look in vain for subtle modifications of character, or the progressive transitions on which the modern actor builds his performance. . . . The abrupt changes of character that do occur convey the effect of taking off one mask and putting on another."¹⁸ Roy Flickinger examines the psychological dimensions of the Greek character

and, not surprisingly, finds them restricted to a singularly consistent state of mind.

Agamemnon, for instance . . . is not like a character in Ibsen, a complete human being with a complex personality, a center from which relations radiate to innumerable points of contact in a universe of indifferent fact. He has not a continuous history. . . . As we see him, he is not a man, but a single state of mind, which has never been preceded by other states of mind.¹⁹

Given such a fixed will as the overriding impulse of the Greek character, it seems only logical to conclude that the static, unchanging mask was the ideal means of projecting such a condition. In order to comprehend fully the significance behind the use of the Greek theatre mask, the question must be raised as to why consistency of character was such an important dramatic principle. An insight into the nature of Greek thought is necessary to an understanding of this cultural aesthetic.

Greek thought is characterized by a tension between belief in human rationality and recognition of irrational and unknowable elements. . . . Overall in Greek thought man was elevated to a place of great prominence, but happiness still depended on a conjunction of human and supernatural forces; when the two were in harmony, life could be peaceful, but the truce was always fragile and could be broken without warning.²⁰

Oscar Brockett's tenet that harmony for the Greeks resided in a conjunction or union of opposing tensions goes far to illuminate the value of a consistent state of being for the Greeks. The formal beauty of a dramatic character was calculated by the regularity of its actions or acts. The greater the degree of regularity, the greater the value. Furthermore, regularity and consistency are the consequence of a vital rationality. In applying this to the constant, unchanging qualities of the mask, one must conclude that the Greek mask symbolized the

sublimely rational force at work in man. It appears then, that the ritual mask and the theatrical mask celebrate widely divergent human impulses to action.

If consistency of character was a Greek dramatic virtue, it seems safe to assume that the Greek actor performed with this same objective in mind. T. B. L. Webster has examined the relationship of the poet and the actor to the mask. Webster explores the question of whether "the poet regard[ed] the mask as a means of conveying his conception of the character to the actor, and [he asks] did the actor accept this transference?" Webster's research indicates that the answer to this question is affirmative. Webster cites two statements as evidence of this claim: the first, by Quintilian, to the effect that "skilled speakers borrowed their emotions from the masks;" and the second, a reference of Fronto's that the actor Aesopus "conformed his gestures and voice to the face of the mask." Webster believes that these statements confirm that the actor "seems to have respected the mask as conveying to him the poet's interpretation of the character."²¹ Arnott also concurs that the mask was a vital means of conveying the dramatist's image of the character to both actor and audience.

[A] concern with outward representation as the key to character in Greek drama was evidently felt by the writers. . . . There are several representations of both poets and actors studying the stock masks and presumably drawing inspiration from them.²²

In the Greek theatre then, the role of the actor in the creation of character is strongly linked to the convention of the mask. As Arnott points out, the actor wearing a mask is "performing an act different in quality from the actor who disguises his face with

greasepaint."²³ The actor in make-up is asking the audience to accept an illusion as reality.

The former is admitting that, for the time being, he is pretending to be something that he is not. His assumption of the mask is an open admission of artifice; the audience is left in no doubt that this is still a performance. The Greek actor assumed a character by literally assuming a mask and costume. To this extent, the mask and costume are the character, and the actor merely the mechanism that gives them temporary motion.²⁴

Undoubtedly the most important function of the Greek actor was to realize the apparent life of the character on stage, and the two most important tools aiding him in this realization were the text and the mask. At the same time, the Greek actor was acknowledged in his own right, apart from the character he played. Records indicate that the actor and the character were perceived as two distinct entities united only through the assumption of the mask. Evidence of this may be found in an event called the "proagon," which was an "act of preparation" prior to the performance..

A day or two before the festival an official ceremony, the proagon, was held which in effect gave the public full details of the programme-- . . . Each poet in turn appears to have mounted the platform with his actors and announced the title of his plays, . . . No masks or theatrical costumes were worn, so that the identity of the masked figures to be watched later in the theatre could be known to all.²⁵

Many Greek actors enjoyed positions of social prominence. Their abilities as performers were deemed valuable within the society they served. More than likely, the respect accorded the actor during this period had much to do with the elevated nature of the characters he portrayed.

A study of the mask itself, its physical nature and its developments through the period are necessary to an understanding of the function of the mask in the Greek theatre. The first Greek theatre masks were made of linen, cork and/or carved wood, and they covered the whole head in front and behind. After Aeschylus' introduction of the painted mask, the white of the eye came to be painted on the mask, but the place for the pupil was left hollow to enable the actor to see. The mouth was opened wide to give a clear outlet to the actor's voice.

For the 5th C. at least, the tragic mask was not the distorted grotesque so often shown in illustrations of Greek tragedy. The surviving evidence, though slight, shows it to have been simple and straight-forward, a conventional heightening of the normal human features. The grotesque horrific mask came at a later period. . . . One of the most characteristic features of the tragic mask was the onkos, a cone-shaped prolongation of the upper part of the mask, above the forehead, intended to give size and impressiveness to the face and used where dignity was to be imparted. It varied in size according to the character of the personage.²⁶

Around the fourth century B.C., the tragic mask seems to have undergone a metamorphosis in favor of depicting a grotesque image that was much larger than life.

The change seems to have begun late in the 4th C. B.C.; about the time when Lycurgus was rebuilding the theatre in stone, a new type of tragic mask came into use with an unnaturally high forehead [onkos] covered by a tower of hair. We cannot date with any certainty the other modifications which followed: the further distortion of the mask until it had an enormous forehead topped by close-packed ringlets, a gaping mouth, and staring eyes.²⁷

Satyr masks (501 B.C.) followed their own convention. "The skull was enlarged in front so that the forehead projected over the eyes, the exact opposite to what was considered classic beauty. The hair receded to baldness on top, showing the full roundness of the skull."²⁸

Old Comedy masks (487-404 B.C.) were of two types: 1) those for real characters and 2) those for fictitious characters. Old Comedy drama often included among its characters living persons of prominence such as Euripides, Cleon and Socrates. The masks developed for these contemporary characters were called portrait masks and were reputed to have been excellent representations. "The mask-makers did not attempt to fashion a detailed portrait . . . [instead] they reduced each character to the fewest possible traits, which were suggested in bold strokes and were easily recognizable before the actors had uttered a word."²⁹ The masks for fictitious characters were very grotesque and extravagant, having a large mouth opening and features twisted into a grimace. These masks were in keeping with the tone of parody and caricature which characterized Old Comedy. During this particular form of drama, many fanciful and absurd characters were introduced, and consequently masks depicting birds, insects and animals were developed.

It appears that up until the advent of New Comedy (342-291 B.C.) the mask developed generally to meet the analogous needs of the changing drama. There developed with New Comedy, however, a strange dichotomy between the nature of the drama and the nature of the theatrical mask. While New Comedy distinctly differed from that of Old Comedy in its attempt to delineate ordinary human character, the distorted and grotesque mask continued to be used in performance.

Pollux, writing in the second century A.D., records a list of theatrical masks supposedly used in the latter stages of the Greek theatre. This list includes twenty-eight masks for tragedy, forty-four masks for comedy, four satyr masks and other special masks. The

twenty-eight tragic masks are generally divided into four categories:

1) old men (of which there are six different kinds); 2) young men (eight different kinds); 3) male servants (three different kinds); and 4) women of varying ages (eleven different kinds). The forty-four comic masks (which were those in use in New Comedy) were also divided into four similar categories, although there were more numerous kinds of masks in each category.

In Attic Theatre, A. E. Haigh provides an exhaustive description of the various kinds of masks listed by Pollux.

In this list are included all the stock characters of the New Comedy, such as the harsh father, the benevolent old man, the procuress, and the courtesan. For all these characters there are regular masks with strongly characteristic features. In the plays of the New Comedy, as each personage stepped upon the stage, he must have been recognized at once by the audience as an old friend. Constant repetition must have rendered them familiar with the typical features of each sort of character. Certain kinds of complexion, and certain styles of hair and eyebrow, were appropriated to particular classes.³⁰

Several scholars believe that toward the end of the Greek period the mask had become a hollow, fixed convention which restricted the potential development of Greek theatre. Such criticism would account for its possible disuse in the early Roman theatre. It would also seem logical, given the growing significance of the actor's art and the declining importance of the art of the playwright, that the mask might have become unpopular with the actors of the period. Nevertheless, the mask was a vital theatrical convention throughout the Greek period and, not until the Italian Renaissance, was it again accorded such significance.

The Mask as a Theatrical Convention
in the Roman Theatre

There is still some dispute among theatre historians as to whether or not the mask was used again as a theatrical convention until the first century B.C. in the Roman theatre. Some historian-critics allege that the mask was re-introduced, after a significant absence, by a Roman actor named Roscius in the first century B.C.

Diomedes the grammarian and Donatus the literary critic, both writing in the 4th century A.D., ascribe the introduction of the mask variously to Roscius . . . or to Cencius Faliscus Menucius Prothymus, whose dates are not known.³¹

Roscius is reputed to have adopted the mask in order to hide an embarrassing squint. At the same time, "Cicero . . . recorded his objection to the mask even as Roscius used it. The mask, he argued, prevented the dramatic use of the eyes."³²

Oscar Brockett points out the suspicious nature of this evidence:

Newer studies, . . . have noted many references to masks long before Roscius' time and have concluded that masks were used from the beginning of the Roman theatre. There is much evidence to support this conclusion. All of the areas of major influence on Rome--Etruria, Greece, Southern Italy--had used masks in their entertainments.³³

Writings by the Roman poet Horace attribute the birth of Latin drama to the Fescennine Verses. These were "compositions consisting of improvised, abusive, and often obscene dialogue exchanged between masked clowns at harvest and wedding celebrations."³⁴ Other evidence, such as descriptions of characters in the earlier fabula atellana (which suggest the use of masks), as well as certain art works (with illustrations of masked performers), seem to support Brockett's claim that the mask was never entirely abandoned in the Roman theatre.

Arnott is among several other historian-critics who offer logical arguments in favor of the survival of the mask in the early Roman theatre.

Masks were essential to the Greek plays from the beginning. . . . It is difficult to conceive that these would not have taken over along with the rest, the masks that Greek actors and audiences took for granted. . . . Masks would have been invaluable in the "mistaken identity" plots that are commonplace in Graeco-Roman comedy.³⁵

It is almost certain that the popular fabula atellana (originating about 275 B.C.) required the use of masks because this form of drama was composed entirely around stock characters. Of these stock characters, four were especially significant--Pappus, the Pantaloon; Bucco, the stupid, swaggering fool; Maccus, the blockhead; and Dossennus the hunchback and cunning knave--and must surely have had their own special masks.

The physical construction of the Roman theatre mask was very similar to that of the Greek mask. The Roman mask was made of linen with an attached hair-piece. The mask covered the entire head. While the Roman mask was relatively unchanged in this respect, the aesthetic nature of the mask underwent a drastic change which reflected the different purposes of the Roman drama. The purpose of Roman theatre was to entertain or divert its audience from the harsh realities of everyday life. As in all periods, the nature of the Roman theatre mirrored the values of its society; these values were very different from those of the Greeks.

A practical people, [the Romans] were for the most part uninterested in theoretical questions. Though they were among the greatest engineers, military tacticians, and administrators the world has known, they did not speculate

about these subjects or seek to reduce them to principles. They were content to discover how things worked without asking why. These traits also affected their art, which tended to be grandiose, sentimental, or divisionary rather than, as with the Greeks, a serious exploration of the human condition.³⁶

The tension which characterized Latin thought was of a more horizontal than vertical nature; it existed between man and his human counterpart rather than between man and his gods. Boxing matches, gladiatorial contests and the like, epitomize this survivalist struggle for primacy between human forces or wills. Probably the deepest impulse promoting this tension developed out of the Roman militarist ethic which was the most pervasive reality to be confronted in this period. Some correlation exists between the dramatic conception of character as a stock type and the greatly diverse composition of Roman society with its slaves from every conceivable cultural background. The stock Roman theatre mask necessarily symbolized the diversity of ethnic traits which characterized the contemporary Roman society.

Another possible influence on the more realistic developments in both character and mask was the use of slaves as actors.

Roman actors did not enjoy the high social and religious position of their Greek predecessors. Most actors were slaves without legal or religious rights.³⁷

Given the practice of using enslaved foreigners as performers, it would have been innocuous to have them portray characters of mythic and heroic stature.

In the Roman theatre the mask became standardized to reflect various human characteristics and traits. Masks were used to stereotype the actor according to age, sex and sometimes characteristic personality traits; these traits were embodied in such types as the

parasite and the flatterer. The Roman theatre mask was not so much a convention of practical and aesthetic dimensions as it was a mirror for human foibles and peculiarities.

Certain other significant changes occurred in some of the masks during this period. Oscar Brockett describes at least two unique developments in the Roman mask.

The masks for pantomime had closed mouths.... Lucien describes them as being much more natural than those for tragedy, which were by then much exaggerated. Quintilian, writing in the first century A.D., refers to masks with one cheerful and one serious side, apparently an attempt to indicate a change of emotion without a change of mask.³⁸

The development of the double mask, representing two opposing emotions, is especially significant. It reveals an attempt to convey extreme changes in character. Apparently the actor using this mask would turn his appropriate profile to the audience to indicate which of the emotions his character was experiencing. The development of this particular mask also lends credence to theories that the Roman mask had become an unpopular convention limiting both actor and playwright.

With the decline of the Roman Empire in the sixth century, the theatre also declined. The mask as a convention had undergone extensive changes during this period. There was a sensed need for it to appear more realistic, as well as to reflect a greater diversity of human nature. There also developed the need for the mask itself to reveal changes within a character. The theatre mask in this period was no longer a revered convention; as it appeared again in the Middle Ages, it became a condemned convention, despised for its association with the process of transformation.

The Mask as a Theatrical Convention
in the Medieval Theatre

Because there is relatively little historical documentation on the theatre during the first half of the Medieval period, it is difficult to construct an accurate image of the mask's subsequent development during these years. Even theatre historians writing on the first half of this period make only passing references to the use of the mask as a theatre convention. Certainly the mask was used, at least sporadically, in various forms of drama throughout the period. In Masks, Mimes and Miracles, Allardyce Nicoll documents the use of the mask by players of the Medieval mystery dramas as well as by strolling jongleurs who "engaged in the imitation of things human."³⁹

On occasion these jongleurs also used another element of a classical stage performance--the mask . . . the influence of the Fabula Atellana and of the pantomimus--mask-using forms of entertainment--can be traced up to a late period in the Dark Ages. We may take it for certain that both on the stage and in popular celebrations of the type of the Kalendae, the use of masks of various sorts was well known at the time when darkness begins to descend on the theatre. When we approach once more the period of light in the twelfth century we discover that just such masks were in common use. Sometimes they were employed . . . for purposes of professional entertainment by the jongleurs; sometimes they were worn during seasons of common merriment in "disguisings" or "mummings." In the middle of the thirteenth century Etienne de Bourbon . . . speaks of ioculators "who sport painted faces . . . which are called in French 'artifices' . . . with which they play and delude men." These masks were worn regularly at the Feast of Fools. . . . Some were "bearded, horned, like devils," . . . others like the heads of animals. In the fourteenth century "viseres," both human and animal in form, were worn at the ludi domini regis.⁴⁰

As Allardyce Nicoll points out, however, "it may be shown also that the employment of Larvae [masks] is a thing strictly condemned all through the Medieval period, the condemnations themselves proving a continuity of tradition."⁴¹

The earliest references to the use of masks in the Medieval period can be found in connection with an agricultural ritual called the Kalend. E. K. Chambers describes the preparations for this pagan fertility rite which was performed in Gaul, Italy and Southern Germany.

Men decked themselves for riot in the heads and skins of cattle and the beasts of the chase, blackened their faces or bedaubed them with filth, or wore masks fit to terrify the demons themselves.⁴²

The church viewed these rites unfavorably on the objection that Man was made in the image of God and must not transform himself into a beast. Nevertheless, these pagan rites soon penetrated even the church services in a form of a celebration called the Feast of Fools. During the Feast of Fools celebration all authority was inverted, and all church convention was vulnerable to ridicule.

The lowliest sub-deacon then took command of the services . . . and the custom, which may have begun as a symbolical reminder of the need for humility among the leaders of religious communities, degenerated into an unseemly riot when the clerks parodied the Holy Offices while disguising themselves with the masks of animals.⁴³

In an attempt to suppress these paganistic influences, church officials finally forbade the wearing of masks by the clergy.

Masks, mentioned in clerical writings with inevitable condemnation, because of their association with folk dramatic practices, were forbidden to clergy by the Council of Nantes (A.D. 890) and by a series of later decretals, as William of Wadington reminds clerks in about 1300.⁴⁴

One of the few documented accounts of the use of the mask in conjunction with church performances refers to a liturgical drama called the Beverly play. This performance, "a 'representation of the Lord's resurrection,' in St. John's churchyard," was given in 1220. At this time, the mask was apparently still in vogue, for the

documentation states that it was performed "by masked actors, as usual."⁴⁵ Drama in the churches continued to be condemned, and finally, in the thirteenth century, it left the church.

Despite its continued use outside of the church during this period, the Medieval theatre mask was not accorded the high significance that it held as a convention in the preceding centuries. Its loss of significance was due in part to the wide-spread condemnation of its use, but it was also due to the uniquely different nature of the Medieval theatre event. Like the Greek theatre, the Medieval theatre was motivated by religious impulses and was an intensely public and communal experience. Both Greek and Medieval theatre events centered around the ritual of resurrecting a divine figure. Unlike the Greek theatre, which celebrated the suffering of the individual through various representative characters, the Medieval theatre celebrated the suffering of mankind in general. The Medieval theatre was also less concerned with the past than it was with the present and the future. Perhaps more than in any other period of theatre history before or since its time, the early Medieval theatre was truly integrated with the reality of the society it reflected. As Glynne Wickham points out, the mystery and miracle plays illustrated a common mythos, celebrated by re-enactment in a formal manner.

The actors in Medieval theatre were drawn from the local population. . . . Their task was not to impersonate characters but to present scriptural characters to the audience "at a safe distance from reality" within the overall make-believe convention of the ludus. Thus blasphemy was avoided and no actor was required to be anything other than himself fulfilling actions allotted to the character given him to play.⁴⁶

Wickham's phrase, "at a safe distance from reality," is awkward and, when considered in context, seems to imply just the opposite: that the Medieval actor very honestly and sincerely performed acts having a real and serious value to both himself and his audience. In his discussion of the theatre conventions in use during this period, Robert Cohen would seem to confirm the very naturalistic impulses of the Medieval theatre:

The Medieval Theatre clothed its actors in familiar dress . . . and the lines were spoken in the rural dialect that was the common vernacular of the audience. These features served to bring the world of the Bible into the here and now of medieval life.⁴⁷

The degree to which these ordinary citizens took their acting seriously may be seen in the documentation of injury connected with these performances.

Attempts to be realistic occasionally exposed performers to considerable danger. At Metz in 1437, the actor playing Judas almost died while being hanged; at Seurre in 1496, Satan's costume caught fire, and actors in Hell scenes elsewhere were often injured by the canons and other devices used to create noise, fire, and smoke.⁴⁸

It appears that not all Medieval performers wore masks, especially if they enacted ordinary, mortal characters; instead, the mask seems "chiefly to have been used to denote extremes of good or evil."⁴⁹ M. D. Anderson describes the nature of the masks used to represent divine characters:

The radiance of a divine countenance clearly called for something more than a human face, . . . and gilded masks seem to have been used for the Divinity. The "visage" of God the father, . . . was almost certainly gilded, and in the Transformation scene of the Mystère de la Passion, . . . Jesus entered the mountain to don a very white robe and a gilded mask. There was evidently a hierarchic gradation in the reflecting glory of stage masks, for at Guilford, the angels' masks were only silvered.⁵⁰

It is, however, in the representation of evil that the Medieval imagination takes flight, and the purely theatrical impulse is given free reign. The character of the devil symbolized the Medieval embodiment of evil. In Masks, Mimes and Miracles, Allardyce Nicoll provides an interesting insight into the nature of this very theatrical character.

The story of God necessarily demands the story of the Devil, and naturally evil plays almost as large a part as good in the mystery cycles. In the Scriptures themselves, however, . . . the Devil is always presented as a serious character, an embodiment of temptation and darkness. In the Mystery plays he becomes almost a comic type.⁵¹

Nicoll also points out that in the Scriptures the devil rarely appears, but in the Mystery cycles he is constantly making an appearance. For these reasons, Nicoll concludes that "obviously the devils were dear to the medieval imagination, . . . not because of their evil, but because of their comic irresponsibility, their posturings, their extravagance."⁵²

All of the devil characters wore masks which varied greatly from one another. Most often the devil masks and costumes were animalistic, "made to resemble great birds of prey, monsters with animal heads, or creatures with scales, tails, horns or claws."⁵³ Nicoll documents a description of an animalistic devil mask.

His head was mighty wondrous and all hairy. His eyes were bloodshot, and a crown was on his head. His mouth was huge and his teeth were very sharp. He had the head of a cat, and a hairy animal's body.⁵⁴

The human devil mask is perhaps more interesting because it seems to symbolize the act of transformation by incorporating both human and supernatural elements. Arguing from the perspective of the

actors' need for greater physical freedom, Anderson cites various descriptions of these human devil masks; his descriptions also seem to support the idea that these masks were an embodiment of the act of transformation. He describes a carved demon on a bench-end at Somerset which he considers to be a replication of a theatrical devil-figure. "Here a human chin seems to emerge from under a heavy, bestial mask covering the upper part of the head."⁵⁵ Two other descriptions of devil masks are also drawn from artistic representations.

A boss in the nave of Norwich Cathedral suggests a wholly different disguise. This demon wears an over-all garment of shaggy wool and his human face is only partly masked by a large curved beak. . . . The most . . . theatrical demon . . . [is] shown on a misericord at Gayton. . . . This is not the usual hideous fiend . . . his face . . . is personable rather than sinister and his body is clothed in feathered tights.⁵⁶

Perhaps Anderson's most revealing description is drawn from three bosses which illustrate the actual temptations from the York Temptation Play. In these representations the devil has disguised himself in human shape with ordinary Medieval clothing.

A high hat conceals his horns, unless the actor discarded these and put on a complete false head, with a hideous human visage. He wears a full-skirted golden tunic and the hand in which he holds out a stone is human. Only his bifurcated feet reveal the fiend.⁵⁷

Several examples of the devil masking his identity in human form may be cited. Later impersonations include a holy hermit and a venerable old man, also with devil's feet.

Perhaps the most interesting developments in the use of the mask during this period were those which happened outside the drama itself in what were known as "mummings" or "disguisings." E. K.

Chambers hypothesizes a correlation between the earliest forms of mumming (or, as he calls it, "masquing") and the Kalend ritual. According to Chambers, the link which binds these celebrations is the use of the mask.

It is . . . in the custom of masquing that I find the most direct legacy to Christmas of the Kalends celebrations in the bourgeois forms: Larvae or masks are prominent in the records and prohibitions of the Feast of Fools from the decretal of Innocent III in 1207 to the letter of the Paris theologians in 1445. I take them as being, like the Characteristic hood of the "fool," sophistications of the capeta pecundum, the sacrificial exuviae worn by the rout of worshippers at the Kalendae. Precisely such larvae, under another name, confront us in the detailed records of two fourteenth century Christmasses. Among the documents of the Royal wardrobe for the reign of Edward III are lists of stuffs issued for the ludi Domini regis in 1347-8 and 1348-9. For the Christmas of 1347, . . . were required a number of "viserers" in the likeness of men, women and angels, curiously designed "crestes," and other costumes representing dragons, peacocks, and swans. . . . [The term ludi] does not, necessarily imply anything dramatic . . . it is a . . . generic term, roughly equivalent . . . to the "revels" of the Tudor vocabulary. . . . The sets of costumes supplied for all these ludi would most naturally be used by groups of performers in something of the nature of a dance; and they point to some primitive form of masque.⁵⁸

What Chambers refers to as "masquing" was more popularly known as mumming. "Mumming" was the name given in England to the masquerades of Shrovetide and New Year's Day. Those who engaged in mumming wore disguises to conceal their identity and then made visits to the households of acquaintances to bring them luck through the act of bearing gifts. "The environment of carnival [which surrounded mummings] encouraged those disguised to indulge in sexual, criminal or seditious activities."⁵⁹ Later mummings centered around dancing and dice playing.

While there is no evidence of dialogue or speeches used at early mumming--it was more like a dumb show--the fully developed mummings of the Tudor Courts included all of these elements as well as songs. Because of the licentious behavior which became associated with these disguisings, a series of proclamations arose denouncing the practice.

Orders of the City of London in 1334, 1393, and 1405 forbid a practice of going about the streets at Christmas ovre visere ne faux visage and entering the houses of citizens to play at dice therein. In 1417 "mummyng" is specifically included in a similar prohibition; and in a proclamation of the following year "mommyng" is classed with "playes" and "enterludes" as a variety of "disgisynge."⁶⁰

Similar injunctions against mask-wearing occur through the fourteenth century until, in 1511, an Act of Parliament went so far as to make even the sale of masks illegal. "The importance of mumming to the drama lay not in the custom of mumming per se but in the basis which it provided for development into drama in a more . . . strictly secular environment."⁶¹

During the Middle Ages, the theatre mask struggled for survival against clerical condemnations of its use. Possibly it was condemned because it became most closely associated with characters representing evil forces, such as the devil. It is possible also that the church's distrust of the mask caused it to be embraced as a symbol of their art by a small but growing group of professional actors who would once again restore the mask to its former position of prominence as a theatre convention in the Italian Renaissance. The most significant development in the mask as a convention during this period involved its use as a device for character, rather than actor, impersonation. The

Medieval mask is consciously recognized as a device for projecting appearances while at the same time illuminating a hidden reality. This use of the mask for character impersonation is a crucial step in the evolution of the mask as a means for conveying character action.

The Mask as a Theatrical Convention in the Italian Commedia

The waning of the Middle Ages and the emergence of the Renaissance can be attributed to the decline of feudalism, the growth of the cities, the increased power of princes and the challenges to church dominance over learning and life.⁶²

Humanism, with its appreciation for the potential of the individual, was the new vision of man which informed the Renaissance. Humanism also sparked a revival of interest in the Classics: "Biblical and theological subjects were replaced by classical myths, history, and invented stories. . . . A new awareness of dramatic form . . . came from the study of Roman plays." In art, the governing ideal was Neoclassicism which demanded an appearance of truth. Abstraction was the mode of representation in the depiction of reality: "the neoclassicist located [truth] in attributes that are common to all phenomena in a particular category."⁶³

Dramatic characterization was no less influenced by the concept of normative traits.

The dramatist was expected to write about the permanent aspects of human nature. . . . In establishing norms (or the proper decorum for characters), all humanity was categorized according to age, rank, sex, and profession and the attributes of each were described. As a result, neoclassical drama tended to depict types, who prosper if they observe the appropriate decorum and who are punished when they deviate from it.⁶⁴

All of these Neoclassic principles can be found in the Commedia dell'Arte, the most popular form of theatre during the Renaissance. Furthermore, the artistic precepts of this period were ideally suited to the use of the theatre mask, and consequently it once again flourished during this period.

Commedia dell'Arte (comedy of professional players) flourished in Italy and Europe between 1550 and 1750.

The two fundamental characteristics of commedia dell'arte were improvisation and stock characters: the actors worked from a plot outline, on the basis of which they improvised dialogue and action, and each performer always played the same character with its fixed attributes and costume.⁶⁵

The standard themes of Commedia were love, quarrels, forced marriages, exchange of personages, disguises and recognitions. Material was borrowed from both classical and contemporary sources. "The actors memorized dialogues, monologues and a collection of sayings, descriptions, and ideas; and trusted to inspiration to give an unexpected turn to a dialogue."⁶⁶

The ensemble of a typical Commedia company included about ten actors, half of whom wore masks: "two Old Men, two zanni or servant clowns, and a Captain were usually masked characters. The remaining five were most often 'straight' characters and were not masked." These straight characters included "two pairs of lovers . . . and a serving slut or maid. Each stock character was developed by its performer, the actor or actress playing the same role or mask in every play."⁶⁷ In this respect, the actor might make a life's study of a single role. Despite generalizations to the contrary, the characters of Commedia works were quite capable of change; although they were types, they

responded differently to the new plot demands of each work. The characters also changed in their interaction with other characters, allowing them to reveal various qualities of character.

The mask was the single most important theatrical convention associated with the performance of Commedia. Unlike the actors of the Greek theatre, whose goal was to be subsumed by the character which their mask essentialized, the Commedia actor and his mask were co-creative elements in the development of a character. "Given certain broad traits the mask might be adapted to the taste of the individual actors."⁶⁸ In Italian Popular Comedy, K. M. Lea discusses the significance of the mask to the Commedia performer; Lea's discussion reveals how the mask functioned as an ideal convention for conveying Neoclassic principles.

Masked actors make no attempt to show the development of individual characteristics but depend for their success upon their immediate recognition as types. They are not people but personages. The fixity of expression symbolizes the self-appointed limitations. As a mask represents a collection of individuals, so the idea of a mask emerges from a study of individual presentations. The mask of Pantalone is the abstract of the behavior of innumerable Pantalones: anything that a Pantalone did or said is a potential, anything that he continued to do or say is an actual, formative influence towards the development of the mask. The character of a personage in a literary drama exists as an actuality: the character of a personage in masked and improvised comedy exists as a potentiality. . . . We need many instances to explore the possibilities of masked characters.⁶⁹

Lea's insights concerning the nature and function of the Commedia mask pre-figure its evolution into a literary convention.

There can be no doubt that the mask was a significant force in shaping the style of acting employed by the first professional actors. Consistent with humanism's acceptance and exploration of "the robust

aspects of human nature,"⁷⁰ the acting style of Commedia was also very robust. The use of the mask forced a very physical form of expression on the actor: "masks . . . imbue an actor with a quite lively sense that his body and voice must be used more eloquently. The chief ingredient of the mask is bodily expression. . . . The masked Commedia performers were noted for their superb pantomime and gesture."⁷¹ In his translation of "La Supplica," Enzo Petraccone describes the function of the Commedia mask from the actor's point of view. The prime significance of the mask to the actor was that it allowed him to pretend that he was someone else: "the comedian taking a ridiculous part pretends to be a buffoon, and that is why he wears a mask on his face . . . to show that he is another person." Another chronicler of the actor in this period provides a similar insight into the actor's view of the mask: "The mask itself is called 'persona' in Latin; and a masked person . . . has assumed another man's person and divested himself of his own."⁷²

Carlo Goldoni, the first great Italian playwright, was less favorably inclined to the mask than were the actors of his age. Goldoni wanted to write realistic satire, and he felt that the mask convention inhibited the actor from conveying characters in a realistic vein.

The mask always interferes immeasurably with the actors performance, whether he be interpreting joy or sorrow. Whether he be wooing, or ranting, or clowning, he always has the same "leather" face. He may gesticulate and change his tone as often as he will, he can never communicate by the expression of his face the passions that rend his soul. . . . In [Greek and Roman] times actors did not interpret the nuances of passion and sentiment that are in vogue at present; nowadays, the actor is required to have "soul."⁷³

During his time, Goldoni attempted to do away with the mask convention, but his attempts were unsuccessful.

The masks used in Commedia were very distinctive and contrasted sharply with one another. The masks were made of leather, lined with linen, and covered the brow, eyes, nose and cheeks of the performer. In this way, the mask freed the mouth. The features covered by the mask were broadly caricatured. The most distinguishing characteristic of the Old Men's masks was the nose. Pantalone's mask had a thin, hooked nose with a pointed beard, while Gratiano's (the learned doctor) mask had a bulbous nose. The mask of the Captain, or braggart soldier, was characterized by its moustache. The Zanni's mask reflects an air of amused detachment. The most varied masks were those of the zannis, or clowns, because there were so many variations of this particular type. Among these was Brighella, a clever scamp living by his wits, whose mask was olive with a crooked nose. Another type of zanni was Pedrolino, a faithful servant who was a born loser: "his heir is the sentimental white-faced clown--Pierrot."⁷⁴

Perhaps the best known of the various zannis was Arlecchino, later known as Harlequin, a rascal without malice, his black mask was "a hairy, wrinkled, snub-nosed thing with pin eyes." The term Harlequin comes from the French and means "reveler." Harlequin's heritage may be traced to the "comic devils of the miracle and mystery plays whose antics . . . recall his devilish ancestry and whose mask and hairy garments, his beast development."⁷⁵

A uniquely interesting use of the mask outside the theatre is recorded in Italy during this period. In The Italian Theatre, Joseph

Kennard takes great pains to argue that Commedia cannot be appreciated exclusive of its social context. Kennard describes the essence of Venetian society as extremely theatrical during the Renaissance.

Appearances replaced a vanished reality prolonged by mirage. . . . Common to all classes in Venice was the mask. . . . It was not romantic as many have seemed to suppose. In Venice the mask was not part of a special manner of dressing, or the obliging accomplice of shady intrigue. It was a necessity on certain occasions; it was the official incognito on others. . . . The bautte, a hooded cloak which hid the entire body as well as the head, and a mask . . . were a complete disguise.⁷⁶

Apparently it was customary during this period to wear a mask and even a bautte to the theatre and then remove them once the performance began. The society mask seems to have functioned in the same manner as the theatre mask--a device for abstracting the individual personality of the wearer and as a demonstration of certain standards of decorum. Very often the donning of the social mask indicated a relaxation of the rules of etiquette.

In the Commedia of the Italian Renaissance, the mask--both onstage and in society--first came to be associated with specific, normative patterns of behavior. These patterns of behavior, symbolized by their respective masks, became identified either as acceptable (when they conformed to the standards of Neoclassical decorum) or unacceptable (when they deviated from these standards). In the behavioral norms which the Commedia mask represented can be seen the seeds for the birth of the modern character mask as a dramatic device in the following centuries. With the developments of both the professional actor and the Commedia, the mask became an integral part of the acting process. In the following period, however, the literal

mask as a convention virtually disappeared. The Commedia players brought the mask to England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and their style of performance directly influenced both the Renaissance court masks and the public theatres.

Through its development to this point, the mask was marked by several significant changes. From a physical perspective, it diminished in size, becoming mostly a half-mask in the Commedia, and it became increasingly flexible. Also, there were changes in the function and purpose of the mask. As the dramatic element of character developed from an idealization of man to a more realistic depiction of human behavior, the mask also changed to reveal more and more of the human actor hidden behind it.

The Mask as a Theatrical Convention in the Elizabethan Theatre

Italian Commedia performances became popular in England during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The performance style of Commedia, while it had some influence on the English public theatres, had a profound impact on the Renaissance court festivals. Italian ideals of staging were introduced into the English courts of Henry VIII and later of James I, and they remained popular through the reign of Elizabeth. Out of these imported Italian theatre conventions developed the Renaissance court masque (mask).

The conventions of the English public theatres were direct developments of the professional impulses of the Medieval secular theatre. During the early development of secular theatre, "masks and other coverings of the face were common."⁷⁷ Other face coverings

included the use of make-up by late Medieval performers. Make-up as a substitute for the mask allowed the actor greater freedom of expression while still projecting a fixed image.⁷⁸ In his Records of Early English Drama, R. W. Ingram documents the mixture of masks and painted faces which were commonplace on the English stage around 1500. Ingram writes that "it is evident that those characters which were not played in masks or vizors, as was the case with Herod and the Devil, were represented with the faces of the performers painted."⁷⁹ Other actors used various means of disguise, such as "French farce-actors [who] whitened their faces with flour."⁸⁰

Perhaps another reason for the continued use of the mask on the early English renaissance stage may be found in the drama itself. The large number of characters in many Romantic plays made it necessary that the same performer play several different roles. Because most companies were relatively small, the mask was the ideal solution to this problem. "Puttenham tells us in his theoretical work The Arte of English Poesie (1589), that the actors wore 'vizards' when the numbers of the company were insufficient."⁸¹ Wilhelm Creizenach points out that comedies of disguise, which would require the use of a mask, were common English fare after 1600. Creizenach also cites the use of a mask by a Shakespearean character.

Peter Quince in A Midsummer Night's Dream advises Flute, who is to play Thisbe, to hide his beard under a mask, and in the pre-Shakespearean Hamlet, . . . even the ghost wore a mask.⁸²

The mask, while still a vital convention during the early Elizabethan period, was declining in significance. There are several

reasons for the decline of the mask as a convention during this period. One reason was the development of acting as a profession so that the personality of the performer became as significant as the personality of the character onstage. Elizabethan actors, who considered themselves to be "professionals, masters of gestures and facial expression,"⁸³ were not readily inclined toward the stiffness of the mask. Second, the humanistic emergence of man, not God, as a potentially heroic being and as the center of the universe, brought about a marked change in the development of character in the Elizabethan drama. There was a dramatic need to depict man as a force capable of change--as a force characterized by free will. Finally, the Medieval incorporation of the act of transformation as a dramatic idea within the play itself was developed even further in the Elizabethan drama. This concept of character transformation was in harmony with the ideal of the human potential for change.

To fully understand the complex changes taking place in the theatre of this period--especially as they influenced the use of the mask--it is perhaps important to study the conventions of the Elizabethan court masque which reached England around 1512. The court masque, although it was an amateur form of spectacular aristocratic entertainment, eventually influenced the public theatres and even the drama itself.

Masque-like elements began to intrude into plays from about 1608 onwards. . . . The masque, therefore, and all the artistic activities connected with the masque, are intimately related to the fortunes of the English stage.⁸⁴

The masque is not essentially drama in the proper sense; rather, "it is an episode in an indoor revel of dancing."⁸⁵ From a

contemporary critical perspective it would be classed as a theatrical event. Masques were basically stories written to honor a particular person or an occasion through a fanciful comparison with mythological characters or situations. These stories were performed with dance and spectacle rather than through narrative. Frequently, the masque was followed by an "anti-masque," which, as its name implies, provided a strong contrast to the masque itself. Oscar Brockett notes that masque characters were usually allegorical or mythological, such as nymphs or goddesses, while the anti-masques introduced humorous or grotesque characters "such as drunkards or fools."⁸⁶ The masque usually ended in a dance where performers danced and mingled with spectators. Spectacle and transformation characterized the masque. Designers, such as Inigo Jones, contrived striking feats of visual transformation from ugliness to beauty in which the human performer was transformed through the adoption of extravagant costumes and masks.

The significance of the masque to the future developments in theatre and drama, as well as to the development of the theatrical mask, is broad in its implications. From a historical perspective, the masque also appears to be an extension and more completely realized development of Medieval theatrical impulses. For example, a spectacular mise en scene, which with the masque becomes almost the creation of a mythical world, is important in both periods. The impulses for this totality of transformation can be seen in the Medieval hell mouth, which was quite literally a gigantic mask, implying a broadening of the concept of maskness to embrace theatrical elements other than character. In the Medieval theatre, even the

elements of dialogue and thought were characterized by the fixed, abstractive qualities of the mask.

During the Medieval theatre the performer's mask became associated with the extremes of human potentiality: the human potential for good or the human potential for evil. The masks within the masque and anti-masque also represented these extreme human potentialities, but they became more broadly associated with the beauty of the sublime or with the ugliness of the grotesque. In both events the mask became a means to explore and experience these latent potentialities; it alone enabled its wearer to realize them. The mask, both in its narrowest and in its broadest sense, became the symbol of an invented reality. In turn, these illusionistic realities were celebrated as a testimony to man's creative potential.

Roy Strong views the court masque as the initial stage in the development of the theatre of illusion. The masque as an event was unable to convey a complete theatrical reality because it was essentially a mute performance, relying on dance rather than the spoken word for expression. Dialogue was introduced late in the masque's development. It remained for the Elizabethan playwright to broaden the concept of maskness to include the element of diction.

The Elizabethan drama was a product of many influences, including the masque and the Commedia.

The typical Italian masks are quite well known to the authors of [the Elizabethan] period. Thus Thomas Heywood mentions all these Doctors, Lannis, Pantaloons and Harlequins. . . . In Kyd's Spanish Tragedy and in Ben Jonson's The Case is Altered, mention is made of the Italian improvised comedy, and few well-known types of character in the dramatic literature of the time bear distinct traces of having been in-

fluenced by Italian masks; e.g. Ralph Roister Doister . . . as well as . . . Captain Bobadill, Captain Tucca, in Ben Jonson's Every Man and his Humour and The Poetaster, all of which are reproductions of the typical Capitano.⁸⁷

The Commedia mask influences that Karl Manzius refers to manifest themselves as character action in the sense of character traits and behavioral patterns.

The Elizabethan structure of dramatic action reflects the influences of the masque. The earliest traces of masque-like elements in the Elizabethan drama were in the form of interludes injected into the main action. These interludes at first functioned primarily to halt action for a spectacular visual display.

[The masque's] influence on comedy and tragedy alike during the Jacobean period may easily be traced. Undoubtedly, Shakespeare's last plays were partly inspired at least by the idea of the masque, and numerous stage writings, both comic and serious adopted the device of introducing into their action short masque-like interludes.⁸⁸

These particular interludes, however, were missing the central incident which defined the court mask--that of a mingling between performers and spectators. As the spectacular interludes developed into episodes, this incident was restored.

Dancers who were personages of a play could obviously "take out" spectators who were also personages of the same play; and the introduction of a mask, generally as a revel in a royal feast or wedding banquet, becomes a regular dramatic device at least from the last decade of the sixteenth century onwards. . . . Shakespeare has a mask in . . . Romeo and Juliet, to which the episode is handed down from the ultimate source in Italian narrative.⁸⁹

The wearing of social masks, which was last popular in Italy during the Commedia, became popular again in the Restoration period--particularly at theatrical performances. This fashion of wearing social masks may have been in vogue partly because of the masque's

ritual recognition of spectators and its attempt to bring the spectator, through the dance, into the illusionary world of the masque spectacle. Robert Cohen offers an insight into this unusual feature of Restoration theatre.

Elegant prostitutes wearing vizard (face) masks were always in bold attendance in the audience. . . . The adoption of the mask by select members of the audience must have added a piquant note of audience participation to the Restoration stagings, for of course the mask was the very symbol of the actor. And in truth these were performances in which actors and audience alike played parts, and a good deal of the "acting" took place backstage and "in the house."⁹⁰

E. K. Chambers and other historian-critics have identified the play-within-the-play device, popular in Elizabethan drama and still in use today, as an influence of the masque.

A somewhat paradoxical type of incorporated spectacle is the play-within-the-play, as we find it, for example in Hamlet, where indeed the inner play has the further elaboration of its accompanying dumb show. And with the play-within-the-play comes the mask-within-the-play.⁹¹

The dramatic inclusion of the play-within-the-play modified the typical structure of Elizabethan drama. Very often the play-within-the-play device precipitated the catastrophe or turning point in the dramatic action. "The structural place of the mask in a plot often leads, . . . to its abrupt termination. The disguises cover an intrigue of murder . . . robbery . . . elopement . . . or a masker is found to be dead."⁹² The masque may be resolved in various ways; the performers always unmask, an act of honoring the host, and they either depart individually or come together at a banquet.

The play-within-the-play device, and sometimes the masque-within-the-play, appear to function as a key-hole metaphor for the

entire action of the play. This metaphor distills the whole course of events into a few actions of short duration which are always played out in some purely theatrical mode, such as storytelling or mime.

Ironically this structural device expresses a moment of the deepest insight into the reality of the situation in a manner demanding the most illusionistic means.

E. K. Chambers, in his study of the masque and anti-masque, points to a similar influence of incongruity by this form on Elizabethan drama.

Since the characteristic antithesis which the anti-mask renders possible is precisely the antithesis between the grotesque prelude and the splendor of the main mask that follows. I want to emphasize the point that this element of contrast introduced by the juxtaposition of mask and anti-mask is analogous to what critics have always regarded as a special feature of the Elizabethan, and particularly the Shakespearean drama, the juxtaposition of comedy and tragedy, either in the form of what is called tragi-comedy, or by the inclusion of scenes of "comic relief" in tragedy proper.⁹³

The Elizabethan juxtaposition of opposing or contrasting elements foreshadows the Romantic movement, but it is also connected to the inherent function of conjoining disparate forces which the mask represents.

The Mask as a Theatrical Convention in the Romantic Period

The last phases of vitality in the use of the mask as a convention prior to its resurgence in the twentieth century occurred during the Romantic period. The Romantic aesthetic demanded an idealization of nature and the past. Truth was "defined in terms of the infinity of the existence, rather than in observable norms as the Neoclassicist had held."⁹⁴ Human existence was characterized by the

dualities of body and soul which pitted the physical and spiritual natures of man against one another. As in the Greek period, individual man sought a conjunction between forces, but now these forces were both within himself. Finally, emotion rather than rationality was the human impulse to action. Within this movement, the mask once again gained prominence as a means to idealize the character. "The search for such ideal truth led to experiments designed to distance the stage from the audience; masks were used in some productions."⁹⁵

The Romantic movement was intense but short-lived, as critics demanded an end to self-indulgence and the return to a confrontation with contemporary social realities. With the demise of Romanticism came the death of the mask as a theatrical convention.⁹⁶ With the advent of Naturalism and Realism came the complete development of the mask as a dramatic device for the expression of character action.

The Resurgence of the Mask as a Theatrical Convention in the Modern Theatre

With the advent of Realism in the late nineteenth century, the mask as a theatrical convention virtually disappeared from the stage. Realism sought to do away with any conventions which obstructed its aesthetic ideal of theatre as a direct expression of life. Robert Cohen describes Realism's view of character as "defined by detail rather than by symbol or abstract idealization: . . . [as] humanly complex rather than ideologically absolute."⁹⁷ Realism demanded that the mask of the character be created in human detail by the art of the playwright and the actor, rather than by a craftsman.

Ironically, Realism's freeing of the actor from the conventional theatre mask elicited an extreme reaction which called for a reinstatement of the mask as a Modern theatre convention. Those who reacted against the aesthetics of Realism believed that the imitative ideals of this movement diminished the nature of the human truth it expressed. These non-realists, as they generally came to be called, hoped to find a means for the direct expression of the human spirit. Ernst Toller, a non-realistic playwright, expressed the impulses of this movement as a desire to reveal man's soul rather than his psychology.

By skinning the human being one hoped to find his soul under the skin. . . . One was able to dominate [the realities of the time] only by abstraction, by shedding light on those patterns that established the reason for things.⁹⁸

The non-realists viewed character as a representation of shifting states of mind and spirit. The non-realistic conception of character was an essentialized depiction of human qualities rather than a representation of individual characteristics. This more universal view of character necessitated a return to the mask as a means of essentializing the performer.

Characters lost their individuality and were merely identified by nameless designations, like "The Man," "The Father," "The Son" . . . and so on. Such characters . . . represented social groups rather than particular people. In their impersonality, they could appear grotesque and unreal and the mask was reintroduced to the stage as a "primary symbol" of the theatre.⁹⁹

Among those most committed to the rebirth of the mask as a convention was Gordon Craig. Between 1908 and 1920, Craig, a designer, producer and writer, developed and published a theatre periodical called "The Mask." In this periodical, Craig called for the

reinstatement of the mask on the Modern stage. Craig directed his appeal for the revitalization of the mask to directors, actors and playwrights. He argued that the mask was "as important now as it was of old." Craig believed that the mask, more than any other convention of the past, would enable the theatre to transcend an entrenchment in trivial detail which he characterized as Realism. Craig believed that art should not represent life as it is so much as it should "lead it toward perfection."¹⁰⁰

Human facial expression is for the most part worthless. . . . Drama, which is not trivial, takes us beyond reality and yet asks a human face, the realist of all things, to express all that. It is unfair. . . . Masks carry conviction when he who creates them is an artist, for the artist limits the statements which he places upon these masks. The face of the actor carries no such convictions it is over-full of fleeting expression.¹⁰¹

Craig envisioned a larger-than-life kind of actor which he called the Über-Marionette. Craig believed that this puppet-like actor would be freed to create rather than to imitate or impersonate. If the theatre was once again to become an art form, "it should commence by banishing . . . this idea of impersonation."¹⁰²

The mask having separated the work from direct representation, would allow the artist to create a consistent, designed totality from the pure interrelationships of its elements, the forms of staging, their color, the lighting, the music, their movements and those of the actors. A related function of the mask placed an emphasis upon the material of which a work of art is made. . . . The unmasked face, Craig felt, defeated both of these principles.¹⁰³

Craig's call for a revitalization of the mask was not prompted by a desire to return to the ancient Greek convention, but rather by a desire to create new masks which reflected the twentieth century state of mind. Craig, and others who supported him, imagined a theatre

capable of the direct expression of man's inner reality--his poetic sub-conscious. They believed that only the mask could fix and convey such an elusive truth.

For the most part, Craig's appeals fell on deaf ears. Neither actors nor playwrights were eager to re-embrace the restrictive convention of the mask. Only a few playwrights responded favorably to the aesthetic possibilities available through the use of the mask. Among these was John Butler Yeats, whose poetic dramas were written to be performed in masks, and Bertolt Brecht, whose Epic drama required the depersonalization of the actor.

Gordon Craig made some designs in 1911 for Yeats' production of The Hour Glass and On Baile's Strand at the Abbey Theatre. A formal masking of characters was a feature of productions of such work as Yeats' latter-day one-act plays inspired by the Japanese Noh plays, the Federal Theatre's "Living Newspaper" Power, and the Berliner Ensemble production of Brecht's The Caucasian Circle of Chalk that was seen in Paris in the summer of 1955.¹⁰⁴

Eugene O'Neill was another playwright who wrote several plays requiring the use of masks. O'Neill, in conjunction with his play The Great God Brown, even wrote a treatise in favor of the use of the mask in the theatre of the future. In this essay, "Memorandum on Masks," O'Neill advocates the use of masks for plays to be written in the future. He conceives of these unwritten works as dramas of the soul and as the "adventures of 'free wills.'"¹⁰⁵ O'Neill also suggests in his essay that all future Classical revivals be produced with masks and particularly that stage crowds or mobs be masked.

I hold more and more surely to the conviction that the use of masks will be discovered eventually to be the freest solution to the modern dramatist's problem as to how--with the greatest dramatic clarity and economy of means--he can

express those profound hidden conflicts of the mind which the probings of psychology continue to disclose to us. . . . For what, at bottom, is the new psychological insight into human cause and effect but a study in masks, an exercise in unmasking.¹⁰⁶

O'Neill's declaration of the central metaphor of the Modern theatre as the psychological mask and the basic motive behind it as the unmasking of character was an important insight. This metaphor of man as a psychological mask was the impulse behind the entire Modern theatre movement, including both the realist and the non-realist visions. The major difference between the two modern versions of this reality was a debate over means--whether the mask should be human or abstract.

Luigi Pirandello, who more than any other playwright reputedly influenced the direction of the Modern theatre, goes further than O'Neill in illuminating the Modern theatre's use of the mask.

Pirandello suggests that we all in our daily lives, . . . are like the masks in a masked ball, the masks of the old Commedia dell'Arte, stereotyped characters with roles prescribed by long tradition. . . . The dramatist sets out to strip these masks off his characters, to tear off their disguise, their conventional costume, to get at the naked truth.¹⁰⁷

Pirandello goes on to explain that truth in the Modern theatre cannot be absolute or fixed due to the constantly changing nature of life. What both O'Neill and Pirandello realized was that Modern man, and consequently Modern character, have lost their sense of singleness--their sense of a unified self-image. Pirandello believed that the Modern stage, unlike its predecessors, was "an illusion shot through by the reality of the actors themselves."¹⁰⁸ The Modern actor becomes real only when he lets the mask drop.

André Gide, another Modern theatre critic and playwright writing on the significance of the Modern mask, explores the question of the mask in relation to reality. Speaking of the entire history of the drama, Gide asks: "Where is the mask? In the audience, or on the stage? In the theatre, or in life?"¹⁰⁹ Gide's response is that the mask shifts with the different periods of drama; it is either on the stage or in the audience, but never in both places at once.

The most brilliant periods of drama, those in which the mask is triumphant on the stage, are those in which hypocrisy ceases to mask life. On the contrary, those in which what Condorcet calls "the hypocrisy of manners" is triumphant are the very periods in which the mask is snatched from the face of the actor and he is required to be not beautiful but natural; that is to say, if I rightly understand, that he must take his models from reality, or at least from the semblances of it to be seen in his audience; and that is to say, from a monotonous and already masked humanity.¹¹⁰

Gide's insights concerning the historical shifting of the mask affirm its significance to each period of theatre. Gide's views on the function of the mask further imply that it is intrinsically a critical convention irrevocably tied to considerations of dramatic action and choice.

In the Greek theatre, the dramatist often drew inspiration for the development of his characters from the theatre mask which represented an idealization of human reality. The Greek mask was valued for its capacity to transform its wearer into a universally recognized symbol of consciousness. It was also valued as a convention which allowed its wearer to engage in unconventional acts. With the partial emergence of the actor from behind the mask in the Medieval period, the act of transformation associated with the mask was condemned as blasphemous by the church. In this period the mask

first became associated through the ritual of "mummary" with the concept of disguise. As a means of disguise, the mask enabled its wearer to become something other than himself, very often this other serving an image of his own fantasies. The Elizabethan focus on man and his potential for change diminished the mask's value as a theatrical convention. The mask impeded the actor's ability to reveal man's potential for change. The resurgence of the mask as a convention in the Modern theatre developed out of a desire to re-establish the transformational capacities of the actor. It was believed that the mask had the power to evoke latent natural impulses which had been suppressed by social conditioning. At the same time, the development of the mask as a dramatic device, which had begun during the Italian Renaissance, reached its peak in the realistic drama of the Modern theatre. As a dramatic device, the mask presented a fixed image of character which was juxtaposed with the fluid presence of the actor, allowing the audience to distinguish between the two entities.

In all periods in which the mask functioned strictly as a theatrical convention, truth and reality (as symbolized by the mask) was an ideal to be actively pursued by the character, the actor and finally the audience. As the actor participated in the ritual act of transforming himself into an idealized state of action, he carried the audience with him through the character's choice-making process toward an image of their potential for such a purity of action. In those periods in which the mask ceased to be a theatrical convention and became instead a dramatic convention, the dramatist drew his

inspiration from man himself. He searched for truth and reality deep inside man, beneath his social mask. The character and actor actively participated in the ritual act of stripping away the physical masks obstructing the human spirit. The actor's method of transformation in these periods was reversed; the choice-making process which he shared with the audience was of a more deconstructive nature. While the Classical character could objectively validate the value of his choices, the Modern character could only affirm the value of his choices by placing them in action and discovering their consequences. In both processes of transformation--which may variously be characterized as either actions of depersonalization or actions of impersonation--the mask was the source of the character's choice-making process.

The Role of the Mask as a Dramatic Convention in the Modern Theatre

During the transition period of the Commedia dell'Arte, the characters performed by the actors came to be called "masks." This early reference to dramatic character as a mask foreshadows, by some three hundred years, the Modern concept of character as a mask of actions. Some years later, in the plays of Moliere, which represent the culmination of the Commedia influences, the idea of character as "a mask of actions" was generally understood as a dramatic convention.

In the seventeenth century, Moliere used masks in some of his more farcical work, and since that time the term has been generally applied to any well-defined theatrical character type, though it may no longer wear a physical mask.¹¹¹

It is not coincidental that the Commedia period gave birth to the association between character and mask. The most significant influence on this theatrical movement was the Neoclassical ideal of developing character as an abstraction from life. Commedia actors were most concerned with portraying the characteristic behavioral patterns which represented the essence of a character-type. This approach to character development as an abstraction of essential patterns of behavior strongly influenced the Modern theatre's conception of character as a mask of actions. In The Theatre and Its Drama, Ralph Culp expresses a representative definition of character in the Modern theatre, and this definition is reminiscent of the ideals of Italian Classicism.

There is no reason to claim that the characters in a play are in fact people, as this word is usually defined. Etymologically the term dramatis personae means masks of the drama. That is, what we see onstage are characteristic patterns of behavior. A collection of motivations is presented as a unique specimen of humanity.¹¹²

It is impossible to analyze character as a mask of actions from a single critical perspective. The development of a character mask is a complex process, interweaving the choices of the playwright with those of the actor. The successful development of a character mask depends on the quality of both the playwright's and the actor's choices, and finally, even on the choices of the individual audience member. In an essay entitled "Manipulating The Character," J. L. Styan describes the subtleties of this collaborative process of character development. According to Styan, the mask functions as the central core of reality through which playwright, actor, and audience identify a character. This co-creative process of developing the mask of a

character depends for its success on the quality of both the playwright's and the actor's choices, and finally even on the choices of the individual audience member.

The development of character is in fact nothing but a finer definition of the features of the mask. It is properly the development of the image that deludes us into seeing a development in the character. In some plays, like . . . A Doll's House, the idea of change in the character can itself be a central impression, but we must not receive an effect and take it to be a cause. We oblige the author by consistently linking together this aspect and that of the mask as it appears to us. This is facilitated by the continuous presence of the actor, and we are likely to go astray only if the author has not sufficiently provided for our natural desire to complete half-formed images, or if he has left the actor with words so empty that he must fill them from his own resources.¹¹³

Several theorists have analyzed the mask of character from the perspective of its dimension as an image or icon. These theorists find that the qualities of the mask, particularly its essential simplicity and its archetypal implications, strongly resemble those of an icon. Furthermore, the mask's quality of essentialization implies an element of control or formal discipline which, when placed in opposition to the living presence of the actor, inevitably sets up a dialectical tension. J. L. Styan notes that the consequence of this impression of the mask as a static element is an expanded sense of freedom for the actor.

The mask imposes a tight control upon one aspect of reality to present it simply. Basically it dispenses with the need to "act," for two antithetical masks juxtaposed upon one stage provide the substance of a situation and the plan for a play. The development of drama . . . seems to have been the gradual freeing of the actor from the mask, but as long as the author was still writing for an actor on a stage, neither has been totally free.¹¹⁴

Another theorist, Michael Goldman, goes even further in his assessment of the iconic qualities projected in a character mask. It

is Goldman's opinion that "all dramatic characterization has . . . an iconic aspect."¹¹⁵ According to Goldman, there is in most well-developed characters a quality of uncanniness, a sense of fixity which immediately recalls the essential function of the mask.

There is something quickly recognizable or familiar in most dramatic parts and always some persistent simplification or abstraction . . . that remains fixed against its details and surprises. . . . A huge icon may have an uncanny effect for many reasons . . . but above all it will be uncanny because of its mask-like fixity, the inanimate intensity with which it presents the animate, freezing it into the superanimate. To the extent that a dramatic role has such qualities, it allows the actor to take on some of this iconic uncanniness.¹¹⁶

Tom F. Driver also examines the implications of this iconic dimension of characterization in his analysis of the character as a mask. Driver observes that the fixed quality of the character's mask, when juxtaposed with the "mobility of his inner life"¹¹⁷ (as realized by the actor), functions to heighten the character's sense of change.

The character is the form of something other than itself--deeper, more mysterious, more mutable. If the playwright removes the character's mask, revealing what it hides, he will move the dialectic to a new level, but he will not resolve it. The character newly exposed will prove to be another mask, negating and being negated by what it hides. And so on. A human being can be represented in the theatre only by a set of masks, one inside the other, all of them worn by an invisible presence. The character as such is only a stereotype (what else are minor characters in most plays?) The person is revealed in the tension between the fixity of his character and the mobility of his inner life. This tension reappears on each successive level of analysis.¹¹⁸

Driver's theory of character as a layering of masks is carried even a step further by Michael Goldman, who views the multiple masks of the character as representing a disguise for the actor. In this

respect, the actor's function is to reveal the principle by which the character changes masks or moves from one disguise to another.

Theatre is not simply a place of disguise but of men disguising. So, for a play to be interesting, the disguises must always be under or in change. In the work of any competent playwright or actor, disguise is constantly being assumed and stripped away, constantly growing and transforming. Acting . . . is not a matter of assuming a fixed role but of showing how the character acts--that is, how he moves in and out of his repertory of roles; how he changes his disguise to meet every moment of the play, responding to changes in his situation and in the characters around him, revealing one thing and hiding another.¹¹⁹

Essentially Goldman is identifying the character's function with that of the actor: both engage in transformative processes through their assumption and rejection of masks. The mask, in its function as a disguise, serves to liberate the acts of both character and actor; it frees their aggressive energies and ultimately enables them to provoke change in other elements of the world of the play without fear of retribution. Goldman's view of the mask as a disguise, which is constantly in a state of change, implies that the Modern character's action is a search for identity. The character switches masks only when he discovers--or is caused to discover--that his mask is a disguise for a deeper, more honest reality. The character is continually searching for that mask which represents his most authentic identity.

Character as a Mask of Action Developed through Choice

At its most fundamental level, the mask of the character is patterned from a series of choices which can be placed in action. John Harrop and Sabin Epstein have characterized the choices which inform

the mask as essentially physical: "It is a set of physical choices that includes everything from . . . vocal quality, . . . and physical rhythms to . . . manner of walk."¹²⁰

Robert Benedetti has written several studies on the use of the mask in the acting process. While these studies are primarily concerned with aiding the actor in his creation of a character mask, they incidentally examine the mask as a character device. In particular, Benedetti's contribution is his illumination of the relationship between character, action and choice. Benedetti, who defines the mask as a pattern of actions, observes that "character grow[s] out of action." Benedetti explains that, in the making of choices, "the character is responding to his needs, to his way of seeing the world, to his relationships and beliefs."¹²¹ Choice is the most direct means of realizing character and consequently the most formative element defining the mask. He further points out that all human action implies some ethical standard and that the character's choices in this respect allow us to discover his true nature.

As a dramatic device the mask is developed through action, which, in turn, develops out of a series of choices. The playwright invents the potential for character action through his manipulation of the dramatic elements, particularly through the element of thought. These elements, taken together and allowed to interact, create the dramatic character's mask. A character's mask will be either more or less universal--more or less defined--according to the style of the play, i.e., how the elements are crafted by the playwright. A mask of finer definition implies a greater specificity of motives and values

informing it than does a more universal mask. It might also be claimed that a more defined mask is less easily shed or changed by both character and actor.

The mask created by the playwright, however, is always incomplete without the actor. It is always only a potential mask which may or may not be realized by the actor; and, even then, each actor, because of his unique style, crafts the mask in a slightly different form. The actor must find a way to align himself with the playwright's choice-making process and then to discover how to place these choices into action. The actor's unique contribution to the development of the mask is in his manner of carrying out the action. In his choice-making, the actor, in the same way that Benedetti explains the character's process, "is responding to his needs, to his way of seeing the world, to his relationships and beliefs."¹²²

The actor's process of playing the character's mask of actions can be greatly facilitated if he thinks of the mask as a disguise for the character. From this perspective, the actor can reveal the essential nature of the character by showing how he acts in a given situation, and further, how he changes from one disguise or mask to another in order to accomplish his objective. Considered in this way, the functional role of the mask has changed little in its development from ancient to modern times; its primary purpose has been to provide both the actor and the character with a means for at once confronting and transforming himself into an image which represents other potentialities. The mask, whether a theatrical convention or a dramatic convention, serves as a mechanism for illuminating the

substance of human action; it is an inherently critical convention which celebrates man's capacity for change.

The Development of the Mask as a Performance
Convention in the Contemporary Theatre

Although Gordon Craig's attempt to free the Modern theatre from representationalism failed to generate strong support among his contemporaries, it generated a wide variety of non-illusionistic approaches to the contemporary theatre experience. Craig's demand for an approach which theatrically objectified the human experience was significantly explored both in theory and practice by Antonin Artaud, Jerzy Grotowski, Bertolt Brecht and Richard Schechner. While each of these four theorists explored distinctly different visions of what the theatre experience could become, they also developed a body of commonly shared beliefs and conventions which function as the basis of the contemporary theatre movement and which generally identify their work as anti-illusionistic and anti-character.

All of these theorists were impelled by a need to break with the representational objectives of Realism and to establish in their place a primary theatre experience which had immediate impact on both performer and audience. These theorists were also united in their desire to redefine the theatre's function as an instrument of change rather than as a form for reflecting virtual change. A concern for process rather than product, actor rather than character, myth rather than text, frankly theatrical conventions rather than naturalistic conventions, transformation through confrontation rather than

identification through empathy, all characterize points of unity among these otherwise diverse approaches.

In their attempt to redefine the theatre's function as a form celebrating man's potential for change or transformation, these theorists were either directly or indirectly influenced by the tenets of existentialism and, most particularly, by Nietzsche's concept of a "superman." This existential concept functions as the moral imperative of the contemporary theatre movement. The significant contributors to the direction of Contemporary theatre are more concerned with creating man in a better image than they are with understanding man from a particular point of view.

Underlying Nietzsche's conception of the "superman" is his belief that the fundamental human drive is "the will to power," which in its purest state is the desire to gain power over oneself--a desire for perfection--but when thwarted and debased becomes the search to gain power over others. He demanded that man give up any hope for an afterlife and seek instead to perfect this one, for to master oneself and to use that mastery creatively (the essence of being a "superman") is the major challenge to mankind.¹²³

Certainly the influence of the "superman" concept is evident in the Modern theatre's examination of the character's potential for free will and self-mastery, but because dramatic character is by definition a fixed pattern of actions, it can never gain complete mastery over its own form.

The actor, on the other hand, could conceivably--if freed from the confines of character and, at the same time, conditioned by the aesthetic demands of the art form--engage in a process of self-perfection. The convention of the mask became the critical tool with which to liberate the actor from the fixed role of character.

The Modern theatre's use of the mask to objectify a character's inner reality was a necessary first step in its later development as a convention with which to objectify some aspect of the performer's inner reality. Once the Modern theatre began to explore the possibilities and consequences occasioned by the dramatic act of unmasking the character--and further, when the act of unmasking was also seen as a means of freeing the character--many artists yielded to the temptation to carry it even further into the action of unmasking the unmasked character so as to expose the actor.

All of the major theorists and practitioners who have influenced the direction of the Contemporary theatre have been stimulated by this anarchic impulse to release and explore the actor's, rather than the character's, potential for transformation--his capacity to become a "superman." This is not to imply that the mask no longer functions as a convention in the Contemporary theatre, but rather that it has affirmed its vitality as a convention capable of adapting to the needs and intents of different visions. Instead of its function as the end of the character's process in the Modern theatre, it has become the means to the transformational process in the Contemporary theatre. The Contemporary actor not only reveals himself in varying degrees by his stripping away of the character's mask, but he also creates a new mask--one which, in most cases, is purely theatrical in composition and is evolved out of his own most private elements.

Artaud, Grotowski, Brecht and Schechner each offered different visions of what the actor, stripped of his mask, might become. Each of

these theorists also sought to expose more of the actor behind the mask than the Modern theatre exposed of the character.

Antonin Artaud: The Mask as Sign

Possibly because Artaud was the first of these theorists to attack the inbred techniques of Realism, he envisioned the Contemporary actor's function as synonymous with an act of martyrdom. His theatrical approach paralleled the cruelty incurred by a plague. Artaud's performer chose to sacrifice his rationality to impulse, his civility to instinct, and his theatrical artifice to acts of a metaphysical dimension. Artaud's approach to theatre was based on the assumption that authentic man was pure and had been corrupted by civilization. Artaud believed that, through the sacrificial acts of the actor, man could once again return to nature.

The theatre must compel men to see themselves as they truly are, without the mask of lies and hypocrisy that obscures the clarity of the senses. Like the plague cruelty finally achieves a release, an act of sincerity in which man unveils his true self, free from custom and accepted behavior. The release is also a purgation brought about through the intense impact upon the senses made by the physical images of the theatre of cruelty.¹²⁴

A martyr is defined as "one who chooses to suffer . . . [to] sacrifice."¹²⁵ Artaud's ideal actor must willfully choose to incur the cruelty and suffering which attend his act of transformation. This predication of action on free will choice is a significant departure from the Modern theatre's location of the source of action in circumstance or environment. Free will as the impetus to action in the theatre only previously existed in the Greek drama; however, in the ancient drama the character's desire for free will assertion was

considered a character flaw. The nature of action in the Contemporary theatre is not dependent on reality nor is it restricted by the demands of credibility. Instead it is free to create its own reality.

The images of poetry in the theatre . . . are a spiritual force that begins its trajectory in the senses and does without reality altogether. Illusion will no longer depend upon the credibility or incredibility of the action, but upon the communicative power and reality of that action. . . . The spectator who comes to our theatre knows that he is taking part in a true action involving not only his mind but his very senses and flesh.¹²⁶

The reality of the performance action is conveyed through a system of theatrical signs analogous to hieroglyphs. These signs, which contain sacred truths, are concrete manifestations of abstract and otherwise inexpressible impulses and responses; they are discovered through the actor's intense confrontation with his own archetypal nature.

A hieroglyph is similar to a gestus . . . but whereas a gestus may relate directly to external or objective ideas--social, economic or political--a hieroglyph is more metaphysical in its connotations. A hieroglyph relates to spiritual or emotional states or ideas having roots in man's deepest cultural associations. . . . It is a refinement of intense human essences turned into a physical image.¹²⁷

The images or hieroglyphs discovered by the actor become a score to be confronted and experienced during the performance. The confrontation with this score in performance is the action of the theatrical event.

[This] event is concerned more with process than performance--what happens to the individual as he participates in the movement from one state to another and explores his connection both with other human beings and the forces that surround man's existence.¹²⁸

The score is a mask in the sense that it functions as a convention for conveying the actor's most essential human reality.

John Harrop and Sabin Epstein refer to the performed score as a macrocosmic mask.

The Artaudian actor does not create an individual mask of character. The mask of the event is all-encompassing; it is the completed, performed score. Each actor confronts his own part of that score and creates the larger mask in co-operation with his fellow actors. The actor does not attempt to disguise his own persona, but neither is he simply performing himself--he is revealing his responses to the situation in the form of images and hieroglyphs that are larger, more significant than any individual. . . . The Artaudian actor gives the audience an experience of his (the actor's) self through the way in which he confronts his score of actions. . . . It is an act of dynamic nakedness: it operates in an area between self and character where the actor's own self is exteriorized and transformed into elements of the total scenic mask (or mise en scene) of the production.¹²⁹

The mask created by the Artaudian actor is physical rather than emotional; through his signs he objectifies his emotional states. This rigorous objectification of inner spiritual states as signs is necessary to validate such thoroughly subjective expression as artistic form. As Artaud expresses it, "Everything is thus regulated and impersonal. . . . And the strange thing is that in this systematic depersonalization, . . . everything produces a significance."¹³⁰

Artaud chose to create a theatrical process which could project the actor's dionysian impulses uninhibited by his apollonian tendencies.

Artaud's reaction [to the spiritual void was] spiritual and metaphysical . . . he [was] the prophet of the irrational or pre-rational. . . . Artaud's sense of life was directly opposed to that created by the rational and scientific tradition. . . . The price of civilization was the petrification of man's inner self, his separation from all experience of life in a non-rational, sensual fashion.¹³¹

Artaud wanted theatre to impact the senses of both performer and audience through a cruel confrontation with conventionalized forms.

The influence of alienation as a source of conflict and tension is also apparent in Artaud's theories. Artaud viewed this sense of alienation as a rupture between all phenomenon and as a chaotic prelude to man's discovery of a more elemental condition.

If confusion is the sign of the times, I see at the root of this confusion a rupture between things and words, between things and the ideas and signs that are their representation . . . we must insist upon the idea of culture in action.¹³²

Artaud proposed that the theatre accept as a fundamental reality this condition "of a rupture between things"; he advocated that the natural tension between all elements of the mise en scene be recognized and heightened to create a sense of formal chaos. Only the rigorous action of the performer could transcend this theatrically induced anarchy.

Jerzy Grotowski: The Mask as Essence

Jerzy Grotowski's conception of the "Holy Actor" is founded on Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty. Grotowski explored a methodology for carrying out Artaud's theories. Even so, that methodology generated theories of its own which, in several instances, differ markedly from Artaud's precepts. Grotowski "emphasized the self-sacrificing religiosity of Artaud's ethic"¹³³ through which the actor sacrifices himself to act. Unlike Artaud, Grotowski centered his approach almost exclusively around the actor, and he gave greater significance to the actor's need for text as the source of his self-confrontation; the text, however, still functioned only to illuminate the actor.

Everything was stripped away to reveal the actor in an intense confrontation with the great human myths and legends. Through this confrontation the actor would reveal the modern significance of the myth touching in the process his own deepest self and that of his audience.¹³⁴

Grotowski was less concerned with revealing the actor's archetypal response than he was with discovering contemporary spiritual truths of a universal nature. When mastered, this creative process of self-discovery would lead to the actor's self-fulfillment. The rigorous demands of such a process required the actor to accept it as a way of life rather than as preparation for a theatrical event.

This is not a condition but a process in which what is dark in us slowly becomes transparent. In this struggle with one's own truth, this effort to peel off the life-mask, the theatre with its full-fleshed perceptivity, has always seemed to me a place of provocation. It is capable of challenging itself and its audience by violating accepted stereotypes of vision, feeling and judgment--more jarring because it is imaged in the human organism's breath, body and inner impulses. This defiance of taboo, this transgression, provides the shock which rips off the mask, enabling us to give ourselves nakedly to something which is impossible to define but which contains Eros and Caritas [charity].¹³⁵

The Grotowskian actor seeks a concordancy between impulse and action. Impulse is the immediate manifestation of the actor's confrontation with the myth. The proper state of mind required for the actor's immediate release of impulse involves "a passive readiness to realize an active role, a state in which one does not 'want to do that' but rather resigns from not doing it."¹³⁶ The actor's impulses, once released, are articulated through "signs which instantly convey the hidden motivations of the actor."¹³⁷ These hidden motives revealed in the actor's impulse are higher or more spiritual than those which prompt his conventional responses.

Grotowski's signs are created anew out of the actor from "the skeletal forms of human action, a crystallization of a role, an articulation of the particular psycho-physiology of the actor." The signs result from the completeness of the

specific actor's surrender to his specific action and become a quintessential expression of that actor's very existence.¹³⁸

The signs offered by the actor reveal his capacity to achieve "a totality of physical and mental reactions."¹³⁹

The performed score of signs becomes the action structure for revealing the actor's most authentic self, and it also becomes a mask in its revelation of a theatrically objective spiritual reality.

The eventual form of the performance once developed, however, is as strictly composed as a dogmatic religious ritual. Grotowski even speaks of the performance as a kind of mask; paradoxically, it is the mask of the performance, the specific "system of signs" which, when performed totally by the actor, becomes the mechanism of the actor's self-revelation. Like the ancient worshipper then, Grotowski's actor authenticates and actually reveals his own existence through his skill as a wearer of masks.¹⁴⁰

Grotowski applies the principle of alienation to the actor's process. His "via negativa" approach to the irradiation of physical and psychological masks reflects his desire to estrange the actor from his conventionalized responses. Essentially Grotowski's process alienates the actor from himself: "another technique which illuminates the hidden structure of signs is contradiction (between gesture and voice, voice and word, word and thought, will and action, etc.)--here, too, we take the via negativa."¹⁴¹

Bertolt Brecht: A Mask of Demonstration

Bertolt Brecht's Epic theatre was developed out of a scientific and rational view of life. It was both a reaction against illusionism and a departure from other anti-realistic approaches. In all probability its roots can be found in the short-lived naturalistic

movement, but its dramatic and theatrical conventions are drawn from a wide variety of performance styles and experiments.

From Piscator Brecht took the technological structure and political focus of this theatre and from expressionism he took the episodic form. His themes were not to be the inner-directed and Freudian ones of the expressionists. He rejected these psychological concerns as he rejected the emotional focus of what he termed the "Aristotelian theatre of vertical plot progression and cathartic climax." The aesthetic of Brecht's theatre was to show and demonstrate the economic, social and political condition of man.¹⁴²

In order to demonstrate and comment on various aspects of man's social condition, Brecht necessarily assumes the existence of an objective reality in the external world. This objective reality is concerned with the interaction between man and the forces and institutions of his culture or civilization.

Brecht believed that human action was historically determined and consequently subject to change and improvement. In order to reveal contemporary truths about human behavior, Brecht believed behavior must be viewed from a social or historical perspective. According to Brecht, such a perspective helps distance the action from subjectivity and forces alienation from the circumstances influencing the action.

The very fact that the action [in Illusionist theatre] was each time assumed to be happening anew before the eyes of the audience implied that the passions of the character were unchangeable expressions of a fixed "human nature," the dynamic tautly logical construction of such plays indicated the relentless course of fate and made it appear unfathomable and incapable of being influenced by human initiative.¹⁴³

In his development of the dramatic event Brecht explored the possibility that man can determine action through his assertion of free will. He believed that man had the opportunity to choose his acts and

through his choices "attain a . . . consistent and meaningful identity."¹⁴⁴

It must be remembered that, with all of the theatrical theorists in this study who were also practitioners, their methodologies were self-generating processes, and any conclusions based on a portion of their work do not necessarily hold true for their work as a whole. Brecht is an ideal example of this problem in that his earliest work seems much closer to the theories of Artaud than does his later work.

In a discussion of the later existentialist, it is important to consider the passivity of Brecht's earlier heroes; the nature of the action of acceptance. This hero does not gain his identity in his choice, but rather in the identification of himself with the irrational forces of nature. In the sense of the absurdity of the universe, the Brechtian despair is an existential anguish, but Brecht's conception of human action in the early plays is not existential. In existential terms, the irrationality, the absurdity of the universe provides an ultimate freedom: the consequence of alienation is freedom. Act itself is the choice of oneself, and the human determines his reality in his choice.¹⁴⁵

Brecht objected to the Modern theatre's depiction of character as the consequence of social function. He found the concept that "function should determine identity"¹⁴⁶ inhumane and believed that suffering was caused by the sacrifice of human identity to function. Instead, Brecht wanted to reveal human character as the "totality of all social conditions."¹⁴⁷ He wanted to demonstrate social being as the determinant of thought and action, that is, to show man as a process rather than as a character, with a fixed pattern of actions. "In actual fact, the given question is always how a given person is going to act in a specified set of circumstances and conditions."¹⁴⁸

Brecht's solution to the question of whether man possesses the capacity to choose his identity was to be found in the liberated role of the actor. Like Grotowski, Brecht envisioned the actor's potential to engage in actions engendered by motives which were higher than those motivating the character's action. If the actor were allowed to provide a higher, more ethical point of view toward the action than that point of view exhibited by the character, then the actor would strengthen his own standards and choices when confronted with similar real-life situations. In a very significant way then, it is difficult to discuss Brecht's dramatic characters without considering the performer's contribution and vice versa; in Epic theatre one is incomplete without the other. Brecht's concept of man as a process capable of change has its realization in the actor rather than in the character.

The demonstrator in the theatre, the actor, must employ a technique by means of which he can render the tone of the person demonstrated with a certain reserve, a certain distance. . . . In short, the actor must remain a demonstrator. He must render the person demonstrated as a different person. . . . He must not let himself be completely transformed into the person demonstrated.¹⁴⁹

In this approach the actor must show both what the character does and does not do. His ideal as a performer is "to establish a critical attitude toward the character which would make clear the character's social function and political commitment."¹⁵⁰

Brecht's approach to action is incomplete without a consideration of the actor's relationship to the audience. The objective which Brecht sought as the end of actor/character interaction

in terms of the audience was "a rational clarification rather than an emotional purging."¹⁵¹ Brecht wanted to arouse the audience to action.

Brecht did not want the audience to mistake the symbols and images it received for reality. He was against empathetic illusion--instead he strove for objectivity of presentation--or the alienation effect.¹⁵²

It was the actor's responsibility to alienate the audience from the character's choices as well as to demonstrate possible alternatives to those choices.

Because Brecht chose to support man's scientific and rational tendencies, he consequently focused on man's apollonian impulses in the creation of his approach. Brecht sought to stimulate the critical and judgmental faculties of both performer and audience.

It is quite clear that Brecht shares a sense of man alienated from a chaotic and meaningless nature with the existentialists. . . . Brecht sensed a gap between man's aspirations and his physical circumstances. He searched for a creed which would bring purpose and hope to a corrupt and senseless world.¹⁵³

Even more than his fellow theorists, Brecht was influenced by the principle of alienation; he would extend Artaud's desire to alienate theatrical elements from each other even further to include a formal estrangement between dramatic elements. In Epic theatre not only would the actor be alienated from the other elements in the mise en scene, but the character would also be in tension with his environment. "[Brecht's] mise en scene unlike Artaud is in a dialectical tension with the words, [a] contrapuntal tension so as to render the action strange."¹⁵⁴ Eventually Brecht would go even further

until he alienated both the actor and the audience from the character's action.

Brecht discovered the mask to be the most significant convention for producing dialectical tensions between the various elements of the mise en scene.

Brecht's use of the mask, which began tentatively with the soldiers' painted white faces in Edward II (1924), continued until his death in 1956. The mask, an essential part of Brecht's alienating, corrective, and epic theatre, was well suited to his parabolic style: it distanced both the actor and the audience, focused narrowly on a characteristic, and, because it is artificial, could be accommodated easily to stylized dramatic modes.¹⁵⁵

In developing an objective level to the character's action, Brecht used both real masks and the mask as a sign. In his earlier plays Brecht called for the frequent use of physical masks.

He was influenced in this by the use of mask in the Oriental theatre, which created a broad yet controlled style of playing in which small emotional or psychological detail was discounted. A mask thus becomes an alienation factor and at the same time an absolute indication of character attitude--a strong, simple, if unsubtle, gestus. A mask leaves an actor in no doubt of the objective nature of the character he is "wearing."¹⁵⁶

The physical mask, as Brecht used it, also helps neutralize the character's identity, verifying the sense that each of his choices formulates, in a very particular way, his identity. An example of how the physical mask aids in objectifying the character's choices may be seen in The Measures Taken.

Characterization remains abstract but consummately dynamic. On a symbolic level the sense of unique and integrated human identity is destroyed as the agitators enact the obliteration of their own personalities. . . . The leader tells them: you are yourselves no longer . . . you are . . . blank pages on which the revolution writes its instructions. With the assumption of masks, the unique

identity of each is voided. They do not even have the negative identity of being no one. Their individuality must become flexible, relative, adjustable.¹⁵⁷

Brecht used the physical mask in a variety of ways, but always with the intention of heightening and clarifying the function of the character's relationship to the action. Sometimes Brecht used the mask as a transformation device, with the actors donning new masks with each significant change in the condition of the character. At other times, Brecht used the physical mask to de-humanize (either a group or an individual character), to reveal the distorting effects of a consuming passion, or even to satirize conventional modes of behavior. Essentially Brecht's masks were "forms of political and ethical behavior": they emphasized the fact that "social conformity means self-denial and rigidity of thought."¹⁵⁸

Brecht's development of the mask as a performance convention recognized Artaud's demand for concrete physical signs to objectify abstract ideas. For Brecht, the concept of "gestus" is synonymous with mask. The "gestus" is an artificially created outward sign expressive of social behavior and relationships.

In essence, a gestus is a refined and firmly outlined physical representation of the thematic idea. Each scene has its gestus, as well as each character--the scenic gestus and the character gestus must reinforce each other.¹⁵⁹

In developing a given "gestus," the Brechtian actor often used elements of himself as a mask. Sometimes the actor would create a facial mask which contrasted sharply with the lines which he spoke. More impactful than the facial mask was the actor's use of his body to project certain stereotypical attitudes or to demonstrate and objectify

a character's formal function within the action. Finally, Brecht achieved his strongest impact through the mask by periodically revealing the actor behind it. Brecht's theatrical use of the natural tension between mask and actor was influenced by Vsevolod Meyerhold.

Meyerhold, whose work Brecht knew, anticipated Brecht's approach to the gest in his 1922 formula, $N=A_1 + A_2$. N, the actor with a twofold function, must keep separate A_1 , his conscious intelligence, from A_2 , his "mask," the body performing the function.¹⁶⁰

In all of the forms in which Brecht used it, the mask ultimately functioned to force a critical awareness of character action on the audience. The mask enabled Brecht to direct the audience's perceptions and to convey meaning in a theatrically effective, rather than a dramatically didactic manner.

For Brecht, the mask was not only one more way by which the actor could be removed from the social gest, but also another means of alienating and shocking the audience into self-recognition. The subject, a political type, would be both recognizable and unfamiliar; consequently, the audience would be forced to examine him objectively. The mask also served as one of many ways to state a truth: "In the theatre reality can be represented in a factual or a fantastic form. The actors [appear] 'natural,' and whole thing can be a fake; they can wear grotesque masks and represent truth."¹⁶¹

Richard Schechner: The Mask as Actual

Richard Schechner's theatrical theories and experiments are an attempt 1) to account for the significant theatrical innovations of the past and present, and 2) to incorporate and extend aspects of these processes into the realities of the social process. Schechner wanted to broaden the notion of theatre to include actual events, and he determined the linking metaphor between the two realities of theatre and life to be performance. "At its deepest level . . . theatre is

'about,' the ability to frame and control, to change . . . the most problematic (violent, dangerous, sexual, taboo) items of human interaction."¹⁶² This view of theatre as an actual event forced Schechner to redefine further the already essentialized theatre conventions which still remained in his time.

The most prominent convention obstructing Schechner's desire to merge the two processes was the audience. Each of the theorists prior to Schechner had increased the audience's development as an active element in the performance experience. Finally, for Brecht, such processes as discovery, choice-making and action become active opportunities urged on the audience. With Schechner, the audience literally becomes part of the performance process; they function as active participants in a ritual of transformation.

Any ritual can be lifted from its original setting and be performed as theatre--just as any everyday event can be. This is possible because context, not fundamental structure, distinguishes ritual, entertainment and ordinary life from each other. The difference among them arises from the agreement (conscious or unexpressed) between performance and spectators. . . . This move from theatre to ritual marks Grotowski's work and that of The Living Theatre, but the rituals created were unstable because they were not attached to actual social structures outside theatre.¹⁶³

In Schechner's view of theatre, performance exists when the action of the event is transformation.

I locate [the essential drama] in transformation--in using theatre as a way to experiment with, act out and ratify change. Transformation in theatre occurs in three different places, and at three different levels: 1) in the drama, . . . 2) in the performers . . . 3) in the audience.¹⁶⁴

The goal of the action is to transform real behavior into symbolic behavior. Everywhere--at every level--Schechner is attempting

to identify, define, oppose and then resolve dialectical tensions; he "wants to bridge the multiplicity of single forms" by means of exchanges, overlaps and interpenetrations. These single forms are thrown into confrontation and, without losing their autonomy, they develop "a relationship that is extraordinarily fluid and dynamic."¹⁶⁵ By means of the transformative act, Schechner is organically attempting to align the process of theatre with the process of nature.

In his approach to character, Schechner strongly reflects the influence of both Brecht and Grotowski.

Performers in the Performance Group are trained to display their double identities: as themselves and as the character they are playing. By keeping these both out front the spectator sees the performer "choosing to act" in a certain way. Even "being in character" is seen as a choice not an inevitability. Thus the spectator, too, is encouraged to choose how to receive each action.¹⁶⁶

The performer's choices to move in and out of character evolve out of the dialectical tension set up between the objective demands of the role and the subjective motives of the actor. The actor, then, moves between two totems or states within a single performance event: as the actor, 1) he moves toward trance--a state in which he is "'subtracted,' achieving transparency, eliminating 'from the creative process' the resistances and obstacles caused by one's own organism;" or 2) he moves toward ecstasy--a state in which he is "'added to,' becoming more or other than he is when not performing, he is 'doubled,' to use Artaud's word."¹⁶⁷ Schechner attempts to balance and blend the disparate apollonian/dionysian energies of the performer under the formulations of efficacious trance and ecstatic entertainment; however, his

practical application tends to favor the irrational elements of ecstasy. The movement between these two states is constantly shifting.

Much like the Brechtian actor, the actor in Schechner's process adopts and sheds masks; but unlike the Brechtian actor, who presents a consistent character through the mask, Schechner's actor and his masks undergo a continual change resulting from the actor's interaction on a multitude of planes. Richard Schechner views the natural estrangement between performance phenomenon as a necessary precondition to the act of transformation. Schechner concurs with Victor Turner's description of social dramas as "units of aharmonic or disharmonic process arising in conflict situations."¹⁶⁸

Typically [these units] have four phases of public action: Breach, Crisis, Redressive Action, Reintegration and Legitimization. . . . This way of growing by means of conflict and schism [is called] "schismogenesis." It is a major agency of human cultural growth.¹⁶⁹

Schechner uses the concept of transformance to move beyond the active breach to a state of reintegration.

Artaud, Grotowski, Brecht and Schechner each approached the relationship between character, actor and mask in different ways. Despite their individual explorations, however, they were united in certain fundamental respects. All of them sought to free the actor from the mask of character in order to explore his creative potential to engage in exceptional acts of self-determination. Each theorist attempted to reformulate action as a process carried forward by the actor rather than the character. Finally, each used the convention of the mask to objectify a subjective human reality created by the actor in his action within the performance event itself.

Each of these approaches was developed to elicit particular kinds of choices which could be identified as particular kinds of masks. Artaud attempted to develop choices which would lead the actor to the creation of a metaphysical mask. The choices leading to the metaphysical mask were sensory in nature. The actor made physical and vocal choices in order to release archetypal impulses. The Artaudian actor's motives were anarchic in the sense that they were instinctually based. Grotowski's process was committed to developing the spiritual mask. The actor's choices were self-sacrificing in nature, and his motives were to release authentic impulses--impulses which verified his deepest reality. The Brechtian masks were both critical (the actor) and social (the character), and the choices out of which they developed revealed the actor's political motives. Finally, Schechner's goals were to create an essential performance mask which contained a multitude of various masks (whatever could be allowed as possible in the exchange between a given actor and a given character). Schechner called his choice-making process "actualizing," placing all the possibilities within the context of the event into action at one time or another. In these various ways the Contemporary theatre mask functions as a performance convention, created by the actor through his confrontation with his own personal masks as contained in the text.

Summary

Several patterns emerge from an analysis of the mask as a theatrical tradition. The traditional development of the mask as a convention exhibits a tendency to project action as spontaneously as possible, as well as to project it as authentically as possible.

Another tendency apparent in the traditional development of the mask is its capacity to function as effectively through its absence as it does through its obvious presence.

Traditionally the mask projects action in three different ways and on three different levels of the theatrical process. As a theatrical convention, the mask objectifies the action of the character as a fixed sequence of acts. This fixed sequence of acts is presented as an idealization of the human potential of a given period. The theatrical mask presents action simply and directly; the ideal image which it conveys is drawn from the world outside the theatre, specifically from sources of a mythic or larger-than-life dimension. Consistent with its reflection of an external ideality, the mask itself functions outside the theatrical process--as an external convention.

In its later stage of development as a dramatic convention, the mask projects action representationally; it objectifies the action of the character and subjectifies the action of the actor. The dramatic mask represents action as both fixed (the character) and fluid (the actor). The representational image conveyed by the mask is drawn not only from the world outside the theatre, through its reflection of characteristic human behavior, but also from the immediate world of the theatre, through its reflection of human behavior as mask-like.

The final development of the mask as a performance convention demonstrates its capacity to project action at the level of the performer. The performance mask projects action in a variety of ways but always as an objectification of the subjective impulse of the performer. As a performance convention, the mask projects action

authentically, drawing the actual images it conveys from the immediate world of the theatre. Performance action is conveyed as fluid; it is structured as a series of constantly changing acts which reflect the fluid transformational processes of the theatre.

The impulses for the mask's development as an acting convention are rooted in its traditional function. The succession of traditional mask conventions reveals the gradual emergence of the performer from behind the mask of the character. With this emergence developed the need to explore the mask's potential as an acting convention. The principal feature of the traditional mask adopted by those exploring its potential as an acting convention was the concept of transformation.

Notes

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⁵⁶Ibid., p. 169.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 101.

⁵⁸Chambers, 1:391.

⁵⁹Wickham, p. 136.

⁶⁰Chambers, 1:391.

⁶¹Wickham, p. 136.

⁶²Brockett, p. 131.

⁶³Ibid., pp. 132-35.

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 135.

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 153.

⁶⁶Joseph S. Kennard, The Italian Theatre (New York: William Edwin Rudge, 1932), p. 64.

⁶⁷David Brubaker, Court and Commedia: Medieval and Renaissance Theatre (New York: Richards Rosen Press, 1975), p. 57.

⁶⁸K. M. Lea, Italian Popular Comedy (New York: Russell and Russell, 1962), p. 17.

⁶⁹Ibid., pp. 17-18.

⁷⁰Brockett, p. 131.

⁷¹Brubaker, p. 58.

⁷²Cole and Chinoy, p. 54.

⁷³Ibid., p. 439.

⁷⁴Brubaker, p. 59.

⁷⁵Lea, p. 75.

⁷⁶Kennard, p. 68.

⁷⁷Patti Gillespie and Kenneth Cameron, Western Theatre: Revolution and Revival (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1984), p. 212.

⁷⁸Make-up as an outgrowth of the mask functioned to project an image of character. Particularly in the Modern theatre's non-realistic movement, make-up was used to symbolize the inner reality of a character.

⁷⁹R. W. Ingram, Records of Early English Drama (Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1981), p. 559.

⁸⁰Gillespie, p. 212.

⁸¹Wilhelm Creizenach, The English Drama in the Age of Shakespeare (London: Sedgwick and Jackson, 1916), p. 400.

⁸²Ibid., p. 402.

⁸³Edwin Duerr, The Length and Depth of Acting (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), p. 110.

⁸⁴Allardyce Nicoll, The English Theatre (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1970), p. 57.

⁸⁵E. K. Chambers, The Elizabethan Stage 4 Vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923), 4:186-87.

⁸⁶Brockett, p. 185.

⁸⁷Karl Mantzius, A History of Theatrical Art in Ancient and Modern Times, Trans. Louise Von Cossel 5 Vols. (New York: Peter Smith, 1937), 3:2-3.

⁸⁸Allardyce Nicoll, British Drama 6th ed., rev. by J. C. Trewin (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1978), p. 126.

⁸⁹Chambers, p. 149.

⁹⁰Cohen, p. 202.

⁹¹Chambers, p. 186.

⁹²Ibid., p. 188.

⁹³Ibid., p. 190.

⁹⁴Brockett, p. 364.

⁹⁵Gillespie, p. 387.

⁹⁶While its significance has diminished drastically, the mask as a theatrical convention continues in use in the theatre up to this day. The mask as a theatrical convention particularly flourishes in those periods of theatre in which experimentation is vitally pursued.

⁹⁷Cohen, pp. 211-212.

⁹⁸Toby Cole, ed., Playwrights on Playwrighting (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961), p. 220.

⁹⁹J. L. Styan, Modern Drama in Theory and Practice, 3 Vols. (Cambridge: University Press, 1981), 3:3-4.

¹⁰⁰E. J. Kirby, "The Mask: Abstract Theatre, Primitive and Modern," The Drama Review 16 (September 1972): 7-8.

¹⁰¹Edward Gordon Craig, The Theatre Advancing (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1919), pp. 103-105.

¹⁰²Kirby, p. 8.

¹⁰³Ibid., p. 8.

¹⁰⁴John Gassner, Directions in Modern Theatre and Drama (Chicago: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), p. 167.

¹⁰⁵Cole, p. 65.

¹⁰⁶Ibid., p. 65.

¹⁰⁷Martin Esslin, Reflections: Essays on Modern Theatre (New York: Doubleday and Company, Anchor Books, 1968), p. 50.

¹⁰⁸*Ibid.*, p. 52.

¹⁰⁹Kirby, p. 7.

¹¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹¹¹John Harrop and Sabin Epstein, Acting with Style (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1982), p. 5.

¹¹²Ralph Borden Culp, The Theatre and Its Drama: Principles and Practices (Iowa: William C. Brown Company Publishers, 1971), p. 11.

¹¹³J. L. Styan, "Manipulating The Character," in The Context and Craft of Drama, ed. Robert Corrigan and James R. Rosenberg (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Company, 1964), p. 110.

¹¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 104.

¹¹⁵Michael Goldman, The Actor's Freedom: Toward A Theory of Drama (New York: Viking Press, 1975), p. 49.

¹¹⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 49-50.

¹¹⁷Romantic Quest and Modern Query, quoted in Sears A. Eldredge, "Masks: Their Use and Effectiveness in Actor Training Programs " (Ph.D. dissertation, Michigan State University, 1975), p. 305.

¹¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 305.

¹¹⁹Goldman, p. 92.

¹²⁰Harrop and Epstein, p. 5.

¹²¹Robert Benedetti, The Actor At Work, 3d ed., (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1981), p. 233.

¹²²*Ibid.*, p. 233.

¹²³William Barrett, Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy (New York: Doubleday and Company, Anchor Books, 1962), p. 192.

¹²⁴Harrop and Epstein, p. 250.

¹²⁵The American Heritage Dictionary Of The English Language, New College ed. (1981), s. v. "Martyr."

¹²⁶Robert Benedetti, Seeming, Being and Becoming: Acting In Our Century (New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1976), p. 60.

- ¹²⁷Harrop and Eptstein, p. 260.
- ¹²⁸Ibid., p. 255.
- ¹²⁹Ibid., p. 268.
- ¹³⁰Antonin Artaud, The Theatre and Its Double (New York: Grove Press, 1958; Evergreen Book, 1977), p. 58.
- ¹³¹Harrop and Epstein, p. 247.
- ¹³²Artaud, p. 7.
- ¹³³Harrop and Epstein p. 253.
- ¹³⁴Ibid., p. 253.
- ¹³⁵Jerzy Grotowski, Towards A Poor Theatre (New York: Simon and Schuster, Touchstone, 1968), p. 21.
- ¹³⁶Ibid., p. 17.
- ¹³⁷Ibid., p. 37.
- ¹³⁸Benedetti, Seeming, Being and Becoming, p. 67.
- ¹³⁹Grotowski, pp. 255-56.
- ¹⁴⁰Benedetti, Seeming, Being and Becoming, p. 67.
- ¹⁴¹Grotowski, p. 18.
- ¹⁴²Harrop and Epstein, p. 217.
- ¹⁴³Martin Esslin, Brecht: The Man and his Work (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Doubleday and Company, 1974), p. 134.
- ¹⁴⁴Charles Lyons, Bertolt Brecht: The Despair and The Polemic (Illinois: Southern Illinois Press, 1968), p. 15.
- ¹⁴⁵Ibid., p. 65.
- ¹⁴⁶Ibid., p. 16.
- ¹⁴⁷Esslin, Brecht, p. 129.
- ¹⁴⁸Lyons, p. 15.
- ¹⁴⁹Benedetti, Seeming, Being and Becoming, p. 56.
- ¹⁵⁰Cohen, p. 262.

¹⁵¹Lyons, p. 72.

¹⁵²Harrop and Epstein, p. 218.

¹⁵³Lyons, p. 61.

¹⁵⁴Esslin, Brecht. p. 134.

¹⁵⁵Susan Valeria Harris Smith, Masks in Modern Drama, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), p. 135.

¹⁵⁶Harrop and Epstein, p. 229.

¹⁵⁷Lyons, p. 83.

¹⁵⁸Smith, p. 146.

¹⁵⁹Harrop and Epstein, p. 224.

¹⁶⁰Smith, p. 31.

¹⁶¹Smith, p. 31.

¹⁶²Richard Schechner, Essays on Performance Theory: 1970-1976 (New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1977), p. 123.

¹⁶³*Ibid.*, p. 86.

¹⁶⁴*Ibid.*, p. 123.

¹⁶⁵*Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹⁶⁶*Ibid.*, p. 127.

¹⁶⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 127-28.

¹⁶⁸*Ibid.*, p. 120.

¹⁶⁹*Ibid.*, p. 120.

CHAPTER II

THE MASK IN THE ACTING PROCESS

From a performance perspective, the mask has also developed as a means for projecting action. As an acting convention, the mask initially projects the action of the character as determined by the text; but later, it projects the performer's own action as determined by the performance context. The actor's mask is created through different kinds of processes which make different demands on the performer. Each of these processes seeks to devise methods for realizing the various kinds of conventional masks. Each process approaches the transformation of the performer differently; some processes focus more on an external transformation, while others focus on transforming the actor internally.

The mask as a theatrical convention transforms the actor both externally and internally (depending on the period in which it functions), into an idealized image of human potential. The mask as a dramatic convention also transforms the actor internally and externally into a representative image of human potential. The mask as a performance convention transforms the performer into a new image of his own potential. In all of these processes the actor builds his mask of action through various kinds of choice-making processes.

The Role of the Mask in the Development of Characterization

There have been several studies written on the function of the mask in the acting process. Perhaps the most important studies have been done by Robert Benedetti, John Harrop and Sabin Epstein, who have developed the concept of mask as a fundamental principle at work in all approaches to acting from the Classical to the Contemporary period. In all periods of theatre, these theorists consider the mask to be a convention of transformation: through his creation of a mask, the actor becomes something other than he was originally. The mask lends form to the actor's process of change. The mask may universalize the actor by focusing a single impulse into an essential act, or it may particularize him by focusing his several impulses into a pattern of conventional acts. The mask, itself, is given form through action. The mask gradually emerges from a pattern of actions, which, as Robert Benedetti points out, manifests a sense of persona, or an identity defined as character.

From the actor's point of view, the concept of the mask must be understood in a very broad way: a mask, or the principle of maskness, is any object or pattern of behavior that projects a sense of the self to the outside world. . . . For the ancient worshipper or actor, the mask was an object to be worn, which carried with it a vitality of its own. The contemporary actor rarely wears a literal mask but he still creates a pattern of actions (behavior) that projects a persona. This pattern of actions becomes the "mask" of the created character, and when the actor puts on this mask he is literally impersonating in the root sense of that word: im-persona, "going into a new mask." He is trans-forming himself, "going into a new form." We who watch project¹ unto his mask of actions an authentic identity.

All theorists agree that the actor's process does not end with the creation of a convincing mask; they insist that the creative

process also leads the actor to his own deep belief in the reality of the mask. The mask of actions performed by the actor should be meaningful enough personally to create an independent reality for him--a reality which allows him to participate as something other than an actor.

At some point, all analyses of the mask's function in the acting process encounter a basic dilemma: To what degree does the actor remain a viable presence through his created character mask? It is generally agreed that some part of the actor is always present in the mask he creates; his presence is inevitable because he necessarily builds the mask from his own personal materials. From another perspective, however, the character mask fails to account completely for the actor because, in a formal sense, it expresses something other than himself. John Harrop and Sabin Epstein have attempted to resolve this dilemma, in a general way, through their observation that any character mask will vary according to the personal choices of its creator.

The actor discovers the needs of the character mask, as determined by the circumstances of the event, in the text. . . . The actor inevitably invests himself in the part--gives it life off the printed page and transmits it to the audience. The character's feelings are the actor's feelings and the character's gestures are his gestures in the sense that the actor is the material out of which these gestures and feelings are created. In the mask sense, however, they are not his in that the choices are selected, adapted according to the total transactions of the play, and shaped by the demands of the given circumstances. Thus, although an actor uses himself and plays from himself in creating a character, he does not simply project his own personality; he plays his character mask, but with absolute conviction. Just as no two actors are quite the same, so will no two masks ever be quite the same, although responding to the same demands.²

According to Harrop and Epstein, the actor's presence is visible at the level of mask through the element of choice. It is in his choices that the actor most directly projects his own persona through the mask. Such intrinsic qualities as his ability to perceive a wide spectrum of choices as being available to him in his creation of character, his further ability to select the most meaningful from among these choices, and his capacity to place these choices in action are reflected in the final formulation of the mask.

In Seeming, Being and Becoming, Robert Benedetti discusses in depth this question of the actor's relationship to mask. From Benedetti's point of view, the different acting processes required to create different character masks also necessitate different relationships between the character mask and the actor. Benedetti has identified two traditional relationships between the character and actor which are apparent in the recent history of acting, defining these different relationships as processes of seeming and being. According to Benedetti, the history of acting can, from the actor's point of view, be seen as a process which shifts between the states of seeming and being. The process of seeming dominated acting from the nineteenth to the early twentieth century; it called for the actor to disappear totally behind the mask of the character.

The process of being developed in the early twentieth century from the teachings of Constantin Stanislavski; it demanded that the actor be seen behind the character's mask.

We can think of the balance between seeming and being as represented by a mask which can be made either transparent or opaque, allowing us to see more or less of the actor's

face beneath it. If we now imagine our changeable mask as a set of postures, gestures, sounds and actions performed by the actor, requiring a greater or lesser degree of transformation by him, then we can understand how different kinds of acting, having different purposes, require different relationships of actor and character, different balances of seeming and being.³

Benedetti goes even further in his explanation of the interrelationship between mask and actor to characterize Contemporary acting as a process of becoming, which requires even a lesser degree of transformation and consequently allows the actor to reveal much of himself through the mask he creates. Benedetti predicts that "the theatre of the immediate future will be . . . a theatre celebrating the process of life itself. The actor of this theatre will be constantly defining himself through the dramatic act."⁴

From the perspective of contemporary acting theory, the actor must be accounted for independently of the character, either at the level of form, or in the process of action. Furthermore, the actor's presence must be a vital reality regardless of the opacity of the character's mask. The actor's function is no longer just one of creating the character mask, but is also one which reveals how the mask is created.

In each major period the process by which the actor reveals himself varies with the nature of the mask itself. In the Classical periods, the mask is directly developed through the act, and the actor is concerned with showing what the character does and how he does it. In the Modern theatre, the mask is indirectly developed through the act; the actor must not only show what and how the character acts, but also why he acts. The Contemporary actor is free to choose any

dimension of the character through which he wishes to reveal himself and to create the mask accordingly.

The Mask as a Convention for the Presentation
of Character in the Classical Theatre

The Classical character mask, while it differs from period to period, nevertheless has certain essential attributes which distinguish it from the Modern or Contemporary character mask. Most significantly, the Classical character mask is distinguished by a single overriding impulse. The early Classical mask is symbolic in the sense that it presents a fixed, unchanging sense of character. The later Classical mask is imagistic in the sense that it represents a more dynamic and fluid impulse. In the different Classical periods this single impulse is variously defined as a dominant quality of character, a universal character trait or a psychic impulse; in essence, however, the Classical mask is a direct objectification of a single state of mind. When embodied in action, the Classical mask presents a character's conscious state of awareness.

The Classical character mask makes no attempt to define an individual per se, but only an individuation of a more macrocosmic mask of character, which is projected by the action as a whole. In other words, character, from a Modern perspective, resides in the play as a whole, rather than in any one of its parts. The individuated mask of character in the Classical theatre is revealed through the action as it is carried forward by the plot. The mask is fixed by the incidents of the plot which are beyond the scope of the character's influence. The only choice available to the early Classical character is to act

in accord with his impulse; in this sense, choice determines character, and character determines action. The later Classical character is given greater dimension through the action than is the early Classical character, specifically through his different manner of participation in the action of the whole. The later Classical character has a greater number of choices available to him in terms of how he chooses to act on his impulse. A comparison of the Greek and the Elizabethan character masks can illuminate the similarities and differences which have resulted from the evolution of the mask through the various Classical periods. On the most fundamental level, there is a particularly strong alignment between the Greek and Elizabethan character masks.

There is a certain relationship between the "essence" of a Shakespearean character and the mask of a Greek. The Greek, being physical and unchanging, is much more specific and concrete than the Elizabethan. But "essence" can serve the actor in a similar way, as a . . . starting point for his character.⁵

In both the Greek and the Elizabethan character masks, there is a direct relationship between the character's essence (impulse) and the character's action. In both instances, the essence embodied in the mask determines the character's action. In Acting With Style, John Harrop and Sabin Epstein develop almost parallel descriptions of how character impulse relates to action in both periods. According to the authors, in the Greek theatre, "the mask is the character, the motivation, the action and--the action is the play."⁶ The Elizabethan character mask similarly reflects a direct "correspondence between character type and character action, and between external appearances and internal qualities."⁷ Like the Greeks, the Elizabethans were

concerned with what the character did; however, the Elizabethans developed the character mask more extensively than the Greeks by also attempting to show how the passion (impulse) moved the character to action.

Change in character through action is a much more extended process in the early Classical theatre than it is in the later Classical periods. Throughout the Classical period, change is the consequence of external forces, and the general movement away from a literal mask accommodates the increased degree of change in the character. As mentioned in Chapter One, there is some evidence to suggest that the Greek actor changed masks in order to mark a drastic change in the condition of the character, such as Oedipus' change to a mask smeared with blood after his moment of recognition; this performance convention would seem to verify the relatively more static nature of the Greek character. Change in the early Classical mask occurs primarily through revelation and discovery, while change in the later Classical mask occurs primarily through intensification.

In applying Driver's modern concept that the person is revealed in the tension between the fixity of the character's outer life and the mobility of his inner life, the Greek and Elizabethan character masks exemplify the fundamental development of these two extremes. The Elizabethan character mask represents the height of inner mobility in the evolution of dramatic character. Because the character's action is realized poetically, it has a soaring, fluid quality; ideally the mask projects an unimpeded spiritual flow. It is not by accident that the Elizabethans, who were the first as a culture to realize their

spiritual freedom and unlimited capacity for action, should express their dynamic sense of life in poetic form.

The Greek mask, on the other hand, exemplifies the extreme of formal fixity. As Harrop and Epstein have observed, "control and impact are two givens of the mask: it is well-defined and unchanging."⁸ The Greek performance aesthetic is spectacle with its sculptural, plastic qualities; what is the Greek mask, after all, but an unfinished sculpture which the actor completes? The formal fixity symbolized in the Greek mask reflects the influence of the ritualistic dimension of the dramatic action: ritual is most essentially the act--as gesture--unembellished by words. Unlike poetry, the gesture (like sculpture) can be frozen in time and space and still impart meaning.

In his realization of the Greek mask, the actor must be concerned with developing a process which fixes his choices; the actor's choices must conform to the formal rigor of the text. The actor must also be concerned with specificity in his making of choices--specificity in the sense of selecting those choices which most essentially express the nature of the character. In his realization of the Elizabethan mask, the actor must develop a process which allows him to transcend the text. The actor's choices should lead him toward a sense of personal and artistic release.

In his development of the Classical character mask, the actor is concerned with creating an objective reality. His process will be mimetic in the deeper sense of a sympathetic response to the dynamics of form. The actor's mimetic process is just the opposite of the dramatist's: he must start with the language of the text, which

incorporates the elements of melody and spectacle, and then work backwards to a sense of his place in the movement of the whole. Because the Classical character mask is most directly presented through the text, the actor must encounter the text and work within it to make connections--not intellectually, but viscerally.

The Classical notion of reality as a conscious awareness of one's existence necessarily implies that knowledge is basically a sensory experience. Harrop and Epstein particularly stress the visceral qualities of Elizabethan verse: "character development comes through rhythms, imagery and verbal structure . . . if sound equals sense then melody equals mask."⁹ Through a visceral connection with the rhythm of the verse, the actor will discover the poetic release of the passion which drives and intensifies his impulse.

Greek verse, though it makes different demands on the actor, also provides him with a direct connection to the character's mask. Because Greek verse is more gestural than poetic, its incantational rhythms have the capacity to sculpt space and arrest time. Greek verse does not allow the release of Elizabethan poetry, and, despite its emotional timbre, the actor must account for the control and sense of proportion which the formal demands make on the verse.

The rhythms and structure of the [Greek] verse . . . are essential parts of the ritual sense, the spiritual scope, and the emotional impact of the drama. . . . Within the discipline of its form the language spans the entire human emotional and descriptive palette. . . . The language itself creates the emotion and action of the character's situation. . . . The emotion, the form and the action are one.¹⁰

The tragic Greek character mask is predicated on a moral impulse, and, in action, it demonstrates the playing out of a single extended moral choice. Robert Benedetti, the only acting theorist who has attempted to examine the various kinds of choice-making processes which can inform a character's action, has generally described the nature of a moral choice and its function in illuminating character.

More nearly than any other kind [of choice], moral decisions differentiate characters, since the choices they make when faced with moral crisis show whether they are selfish, hypocritical, or persons of integrity. A moral decision usually causes a character to examine his own motives and values, in the process of which his true nature is revealed both to himself and to the audience.¹¹

The tragic action as a whole is a magnification of the complex structure of a single moral choice. The end of a moral choice represents the affirmation of a value. The structure of a moral choice demands that the actor acknowledge two possible courses of action, and that he should actively explore both as viable possibilities before he chooses to carry one into action. Once he has chosen his course of action, the character must act in accord with the idealized image of himself which the moral choice symbolizes. In the Greek drama, a moral choice initiates the play's action, during the course of which the alternative action continues to present itself as a possibility. With the character's moment of recognition comes the discovery that he has chosen an action which is really a disguise of his deeper reality, or, from Goldman's perspective, he discovers that he has been acting a role. He then chooses instead to play out the alternative course of action which initiates the process of reversal.

In this sense, then, the Greek character is an actor. Like the Modern character, he too engages in the action of role-playing, only his concern is with one rather than with several roles. Interestingly enough, the alternative course of action in the structure of a moral choice is always psychological; this seems to imply that the action of the reversal is a direct explication of the character's subconscious which later becomes the point of departure for character action in the Elizabethan drama.

This view of the Greek character mask as a role has several important implications for the actor. It will be beneficial to the actor to think of the early Classical character as a performer--as one who attempts to convince the other characters that his mask of morality is real.

In building the mask, the actor should start with his own moral impulse--his own desire to be better than he is--and attempt to act on this source of energy. The actor must constantly be aware of the alternative possibility (or the possibility of both his and the character's failure to live up to the action of the mask) as it is presented to him through the actions of other characters in the play. The actor must account for the character's discovery of himself as an imposter, for it is in these moments that the actor will most completely reveal both the character and himself. Acknowledging this fearful (yet theatrically authentic) possibility will allow the actor gradually to change in preparation for his donning of a new mask.

The Elizabethan character mask in action involves the playing out of an extended psychological choice. Psychological choices "reveal

. . . a character's habitual responses, desires . . . the inner workings of the mind." The psychological choice, which is "the most essential level of characterization,"¹² often arises from conflicting desires. In the Modern theatre it precedes action and reflects only the character's thought process; in the Elizabethan theatre, it is carried directly into action. The Elizabethan character does not, like the Modern character, inhibit his psychic impulse in an attempt to accomodate external influences. His psychic impulse is intensified through contrast by its encounter with external influences. The psychological choice is essentially sensory, for it entails the activation of a dynamic inner life.

In the Elizabethan, as in the Greek theatre, the structure of the dramatic action parallels the structure of the basic choice-making process. Actually, it is the same structure as encountered with the moral choice; but the focus has been shifted: the character does not act to play out his moral choice, but rather to avoid it, for in the Elizabethan theatre the emphasis is on freedom, not on moral responsibility. Elizabethan drama places emphasis on playing out the alternative course of action in the belief that joy, not terror, lies with this possibility. Ultimately the character's initial psychological choice is confronted with an inevitable moral or social choice which inhibits his essential nature and generally results in his destruction.

The Elizabethan character is also a performer, though his disguises function in a different manner; they allow him to play out his desires in virtual freedom from the tragic consequences which would

naturally befall him were he to act without the benefit of disguise. Viola, in Twelfth Night, is an ideal example of how disguise frees the character to act. Viola's disguise allows her to remain near the man she loves; further, it enables her to act on her passion. Without it, she could not change the course of the play's action in her favor.

In creating the Elizabethan character mask, the actor must make choices which stimulate his own subconscious impulses from moment to moment throughout the action. These choices should be strong enough to allow him actually to experience the desires and impulses on which he acts. In his making of psychological choices, the actor should seek his most essential responses, both to the images of the text and to the external stimuli of the play world. The actor should also account for the freedom inherent in the idea of his character as an actor. This freedom most directly manifests itself both as a joy attending the character's act of performance, and as an anguish resulting from the character's loss of disguise.

Other Classical periods are characterized by the playing out of other individual choice-making processes. In the Roman period, an essentially physical impulse results in an action predicated on a physical choice-making process. In periods such as the Restoration and French Neoclassic, a social impulse occasions an action composed primarily of social choices. Most significantly, Classical character masks were, to some degree, accumulative in the sense that they historically tended to account for each of the individual choice-making processes developed in previous periods.

The tension between the actor and the character mask in the Classical theatre is extensive and consequently should be accounted for in the playing out of the character masks. From the actor's point of view, the role, as embodied in the mask, is a distinctly symbolic "other"--more so in the earlier periods, but generally the case throughout the Classical theatre. Even in the Medieval and Elizabethan periods, where the reality of the actor is an absolutely necessary dimension of the mask, the actor is still required to transform himself spiritually. If the actor acknowledges this distance between himself and the role as synonymous with the distance between the character's reality and his mask, he can then incorporate this sense of alienation as a positive aspect of his performance process. Despite, however, the distance between the Classical mask and the actor, there is an undeniably strong awareness of the actor's actual presence in the Classical period. This sense of the actor's reality is inevitable because the Classical character mask demands that the actor project an essence rather than a characteristic behavior. In order to project such an essence, the actor must work from his own deepest resources: his poetic and plastic impulses. The true Classical mask transforms the actor inside; it focuses his energies into elemental, highly sensory impulses; it manipulates and shapes him, rather than he it. Like the Classical character, the actor creates a valid mask only if he extends his own personal resources to meet the idealistic demands of the action.

The Mask as a Convention for the Representation
of Character in the Modern Theatre

In the Modern theatre, the character wears a multitude of masks. The numerous masks of the Modern character are representative of the various masks worn individually in the different Classical periods. In the Modern theatre the actor as mask-maker replaced the mask as an acting convention found in the Classical theatre. This change in the actor's function is occasioned by the Modern character's more substantial orientation toward mobility which began in the Elizabethan period. Like the Elizabethan character, the Modern character's reality is fluid; unlike the Elizabethan character, the Modern character is masked by an appearance which projects the impression of a fragmented identity. This appearance, or mask of the character, presents itself through the text as a diversity of conflicting impulses. Luigi Pirandello succinctly explained the essential difference between the Classical character mask and the masks of the Modern character:

The last generation looked upon nature and man as something existing in an unchanging, clear-cut and solid form outside of us. To me reality is something that we mold through the power of our imagination. . . . We look upon ourselves as solid . . . personalities, while in reality we are the juxtaposition of infinite, blurred selves.¹³

Imagination is the source of creative inspiration for the Modern character masks because it is only in half-formed images that the intangible, yet fluid, subconscious reality can be adequately expressed.

This analysis of the Modern character mask appears so similar to that of the Elizabethan in its basic impulse to activate the fluid

subconscious that it is perhaps important to ask why the Modern character does not experience a poetic release. The answer is that the Elizabethan character was unique in his Romantic naivete; he essentially believed that he was the determinate factor in his own destiny.

The Modern character has been forced to contend with the realization that his essence is obstructed by the fixed condition of his situation or environment. The text of the Modern character is a mask which inhibits his essence. Moreover, the essence of the Modern character is not directly expressed through the text but through the actor in sculptural and plastic terms, more similar in form to the Greek mask than to the Elizabethan mask. Because the Modern character's essence is obstructed, this necessarily creates a discrepancy between his external appearance and his internal reality. This discrepancy is embodied in the action of the mask which seeks to incorporate the conventional acts of the character with the authentic acts of the actor. The character uses the mask of the text to accommodate the external demands of the situation, while the actor creates another mask of actions beneath the text which allows him to rebel against the character's accommodation. For this reason, an individual character mask is often played out in opposition to the more authentic impulse of the actor.

The Modern theatre is less concerned with what the character does or even with how he acts than with why he acts. A character's real motive resides in his subconscious reality at the actor level and, because it is masked by the text, it appears to be vague and

ill-defined. The entire action of the Modern drama is predicated on the character's coming to terms with his own real motive as expressed through the actor and ultimately developing a consistency of action through it. Pirandello expresses the loss of an objective character motivation as a consequence of Modern man's inability to distinguish between illusion and reality: "We are not wholly conscious of our own motivation."¹⁴ Because the character is not always conscious of his motive, it cannot be directly presented through the action, only inferred through the tension between the character's subconscious and conscious levels of awareness.

Change through action is a very condensed process for the Modern character. Change in the character mask is more the consequence of internal rather than external influences, but often it can operate simultaneously on both levels. Change occurs directly through the character's shifting back and forth between the various masks contained in the text. Change indirectly manifests itself in the tension between the character's conscious awareness at the mask level and his subconscious impulses at the actor level. Just as the conscious and subconscious levels merge in the act of discovery, so too, the actor and the character merge in the process of self-discovery--or at that point in which the actor discovers himself in the character.

The Modern character can also be thought of as actor; he attempts, however, to play several roles successfully rather than just one. Basically the character plays a social role, though this role is the one furthest removed from the reality of the character. All the character's roles have their source in the character's consciousness as

a multiplicity of conventional impulses. The actor's approach to the creation of the Modern character's masks will be greatly facilitated by the methods of Constantin Stanislavski. It is not coincidental that a great acting theorist like Stanislavski should emerge at a time when the actor had the opportunity to be a co-equal creator with the dramatist. The Modern actor was not only expected to create the reality or essence of the character but was also expected to create an independent, subjective reality for himself. The approach to acting which Stanislavski developed shifted the nature of the actor's creative process from one of mimesis to one of transformation. Acting was no longer thought of as imitation but as process.

It was no longer a question of purely external control . . . of skillfully reproducing a facsimile of experience, but creating and conveying inner life, a sense of being, fresh each time. . . . Stanislavski's technique called for the actor to transform himself body and soul into the character he was portraying. "I propose for actors a complete inner and external metamorphosis."¹⁵

Stanislavski's approach to acting as a process of transformation was analogous to the character's process of action. Like the actor, the character also acted to transform his outer reality (his multiple masks) into his inner, psychic reality (a new, more authentic mask). The character's action is ultimately to experience and act on his subconscious impulses; however, the various outer masks, behind which he conceals his inner reality, allow him the freedom to influence and change the fixed condition of his situation/environment. Fundamentally, the Modern character acts to divest himself of disguise; he seeks to free himself from his conventional masks. Stanislavski

viewed the actor's creation of a character's masks as a process which granted the actor a similar sense of freedom and influence.

A characterization is the mask which hides the actor/individual. Protected by it he can lay bare his soul down to the last intimate detail. Characterization, when accompanied by a real transposition, a sort of re-incarnation, is a great thing.¹⁶

Stanislavski's psychophysical technique, which was developed to activate the actor's subconscious impulses through conscious means, necessarily reversed the dramatist's process of character development. While the dramatist created the physical dimension of the character (his words and acts) as the direct or indirect manifestation of his subconscious, the actor worked directly to manifest the subconscious through his mastery of the concrete or physical dimension.

The actor goes onstage to fulfill simple physical actions without forcing an emotion beforehand. In fulfilling the unique physical action, the actor involves the psychological side of the action by reflex; this includes emotions.¹⁷

The text reflects the character's conscious dimension and is the source of his physical actions. The word is "the physical side of the psychophysical process,"¹⁸ and the images it contains can serve to "trigger" the actor's inner life. According to Stanislavski, "the spoken word, the text of a play is not valuable in and of itself, but is made so by the inner content of the subtext and what is contained in it."¹⁹ The subtext is the "inner life," the repository of the character's passion, the essence of the character mask.

[Subtext] is the manifest, the inwardly felt expression of a human being in a part, which flows uninterruptedly beneath the words of the text, giving them life and a basis for existing. The subtext is a web of innumerable, varied inner patterns inside a play and a part, woven from "magic if's," given circumstances, all sorts of figments of the imagination, inner movements, objects of attention, smaller

and greater truths and a belief in them, adaptations, adjustments and other similar elements. It is the subtext that makes us say the words we do in a play.²⁰

It is in the subtext that the character's authentic action can be found. From the actor's point of view, "a subtext is really an intention which is indirectly expressed . . . the character cannot, for some reason, take direct action and chooses to express himself through some indirect statement or activity."²¹

As it relates to the actor's choice-making process, the subtextual level is directly or indirectly revealed through a variety of different kinds of choices. The character's subconscious is most directly revealed through the psychological choice; the psychological choice directly presents the actor in action. Through the psychological choice, the actor is able to reveal the character's inner life and thought processes which express unconscious or conscious needs upon which the character chooses not to act. While the psychological choice may lead to a discovery which provokes change, it is never carried directly into action. The psychological choice is prevented from becoming action because the character chooses or is forced to play against it with other choices. Most often, the Modern character conceals the psychological choice with a social choice. Through the social choice, the character attempts to adapt to his environment; he chooses, or is forced, to perform according to the momentary demands of the situation. The collision between different kinds of psychological and social choices results in the character's projection of different kinds of fragmented masks.

The actor must be concerned with revealing the principle by which the Modern character chooses to change masks. The actor has a good deal of latitude concerning his choices to move into a given mask, to lose it completely, or to move into another kind of mask. The actor is free to choose from among the various choice-making processes available to him in his formulation of the character masks. It will help the actor to think of the text as a series of masks which the character wears in order to perpetuate his own freedom of action within the restrictive confines of his environment/situation.

Because the subtextual level is essentially the actor's creation, it most nearly reflects his own personal reality and permits him the opportunity to choose those images which will most directly allow him to experience a reality with the action. He can also create a strong sense of personal actuality by continuously stimulating his own impulses in the here and now so that he builds the fluid subconscious reality from his own most authentic resources. In a fundamental sense, the actor creating a Modern character mask has the same objective as the actor creating a Classical mask: he is primarily concerned with creating and projecting an essence. In order to project the essence of the Modern character, the actor must divest the character of his multiple masks as contained in the text.

The Mask as a Convention for the Performance of Character in the Contemporary Theatre

The Contemporary theatre (since 1960) is loosely defined by numerous independent movements which are so wide-ranging in scope and vision as to be comparable to the various Classical periods in

proliferation of styles and approaches. For this reason, and also because it is still changing, it is difficult to define the Contemporary actor's function regarding character. Certain broad patterns have begun to emerge, however, which can provide some insight into the nature of the contemporary character mask.

First, the mask created by the Contemporary actor can no longer be considered a mask of character in the same sense as it was understood in the Modern theatre. Today's theatre is less concerned with the revelation of a dramatic character through action than it is with revealing the performer through his acts. The Contemporary mask more accurately functions to reveal the character or the Persona of the performer.

This contemporary shift in focus from character to actor is the consequence of several converging factors. Most significant among these factors is the emergence of a new vision of reality, a perception of truth as phenomenological rather than objective. This view of reality no longer accepts the Modern notion of a "universal point of view" derived from seeing the "whole picture." For the phenomenologist, "there is no objective whole picture";²² the universe is essentially unknowable, inaccessible to human understanding. Instead, reality is perceived to exist in the conscious recognition of one's individual point of view toward a given phenomenon.

In theatrical terms, this contemporary philosophy translates into a move away from Realism's preoccupation with the sub-conscious as the source of human reality in favor of a focus on shifting states of conscious awareness. The mind of contemporary man is more broadly

conceived as a patterning system: a "single, total organismic field comprised of past and present, conscious and unconscious, physical and spiritual aspects, all inseparably intermingled."²³ This sense of man as a complex network of vastly different impulses--sometimes in contradiction to each other and often existing simultaneously--leaves man free to explore different potential identities as they might exist at any given moment either within or outside himself.

Similarly from the dramatist's point of view, all fixed reality is considered to be a "fiction;" instead, the dramatist conceives of reality as essentially theatrical: as "shifting performance" and of "performance [as] the only reality."²⁴

Writers and directors working at the edge of the theatre seem to perceive that they are in a new kind of world in which there is no longer anything "out there" or anyone "in here," to imitate (in Aristotle's terms) or to represent, such artists seem to be saying. The result, seen in a decade of experimental group work, in a number of striking new plays and adaptations of classics has been a stage turned curiously in upon itself, blurring the old distinctions between self and world, being and thing: and doing so not through a representation of the outer world but through the development of a performance art "about" performance itself.²⁵

The Contemporary theatre now sees its function as structuring form from its own materials rather than exclusively from the materials of a world outside itself. Its intent is to construct a thoroughly artificial reality which, from a phenomenological perspective, is as--if not more--authentic than the reality ascribed to any other individual phenomenon. In its attempt to create action from the interaction of its own natural elements, the Contemporary theatre is actively engaged in destroying its own conventions in the hope of discovering its most authentic nature. It is commonly believed that

the integrity of this self-referential process resides in its capacity to account for the presence of actual phenomenon within its formal structure. In this respect, the performer and his real-time presence have become of primary importance.

The procedures of making theatre are, I think, attempts at ritualizing performance, of finding in the theatre itself authenticating acts. In a period when authenticity is increasingly rare in public life the performer has been asked to surrender his traditional masks and be himself; or at least to show how the masks are put on and taken off. Instead of mirroring his times the performer is asked to remedy them.²⁶

The Contemporary actor is also impelled by a need to create a more authentic reality in his own terms. The audacious experiments in freeing the actor which began with Artaud have tempted the actor to seek even greater freedom from the mask of character. Richard Schechner, as one of those early experimenters who went far in separating the actor from the character, has continued to address the actor's desire for greater creativity through various books and essays.

Must performers always wear the masks of characters? Is the best they can hope for the temporary stepping aside suggested by Brecht (who then as playwright/director, controlled what the actor said about character)? Many performers wanted to rip off this mask of character. A mask built by authors who literally put words in the mouth of actors; and then those words, and the actors' very bodies, were reformed by directors who in composing the mise en scene lay one more mask over the actor. First the author's and later, the director's authority was challenged and overturned.²⁷

By viewing the Contemporary character, not in the Modern sense as an actor (one who appears to do), but rather as a performer (one who does), the Contemporary performer is virtually freed from "acting." Unlike the Modern character, whose function is to act a role(s), the Contemporary character "improvise(s), in public, aspects

of his private, imaginative life;" in other words, the character's inner life is directly presented in fractured bits and pieces, not as a fluid and continuous whole. The Contemporary character is transformational in the sense that he plays as many dimensions of himself as possible in the course of his action. The Contemporary actor, like the transformational character, is "less interested in playing several roles than [he is] in conceptualizing (creating images of) a whole new self."²⁸

It's long been okay for performers to "use" their own lives in constructing roles. Recently these life elements are not disguised, masked, or metaphored as in orthodox acting but enlisted in and of themselves.²⁹

Through his acts as a performer, the actor is defining or developing an authentic part of himself; he is creating the role of himself through a process of self-actualization. This process gives the performer, rather than the playwright, the responsibility for developing the potential for confrontation: "in role-playing the situation sets the scene, but in 'performance' the individual sets up the situation."³⁰

Robert Benedetti describes this setting up of a situation by the actor as a "manipulation of context;" the creation of such a situation or context provides a perspective on the action which is performed within it. The creation of a performance context is essentially a collaborative process.

The stage actor is concerned not only with a performance which is a set of actions, but also with the creation of a context within which those actions are interpreted. For this reason the actor's job has never been merely the creation of his own character; all the members of a cast must share in the responsibility of creating a total context of

maximum value to each performance. This is done primarily through relationship, the way each actor/character relates to every other actor/character; we must support each other's identity by creating a totally supportive context in which those identities will be interpreted.³¹

In building the mask of himself, the Contemporary actor might begin by choosing the work he wants to use as his vehicle of self-definition. Once the work is chosen, he will begin, like his predecessors, with the text; unlike his predecessors, however, he is working to extend himself through his encounter with the text to a new level in which text becomes merely a pretext for his personal artistic choices. This new level might be considered a kind of surtext since it involves the creation of a reality above and beyond the scope of the text--a reality which emphasizes the performer's, rather than the character's, point of view concerning the action.

The surtextual level represents a rejection of the performer's personal masks in favor of the creation of a mask of authenticity. The impulses released by the performer's confrontation with the text, as well as the impulses developed out of his encounter with the reality of the performance context (mise en scene), create a field of potential acts from which the performer must choose only those acts which represent his most authentic impulses. In his choice-making process the performer is also concerned with selecting those acts which most directly impart a sense of form. In this second instance, it becomes necessary for the performer to determine the general nature of his acts; for example, are they more political than social, more spiritual than moral? What is their essence? As in all previous periods, the Contemporary performer is concerned with creating an essence; however,

in the Contemporary theatre, the essence is recognizable as that of the performer, rather than that of the character.

The Mask as a Convention for the Performance
of Self in the Post-modern Theatre

Perhaps the freeing of the actor from the mask of character is nowhere more apparent than in a mode of theatre which has come to be known as autoperformance. Conceived of and made significant by Spalding Gray, formerly a member of Richard Schechner's Performance Group, this mode of performing represents a personal style of working in which the actor actually uses himself as text; he literally structures his own performance material from bits and pieces of his personal and public life.

In a technical sense, autoperformance as a concept refers to "presentations conceived and performed by the same person. Although they are often solo performances, this is not a defining characteristic."³² Autoperformance is also characterized by the inclusion--either implicitly or explicitly--of autobiographical material in the performance.

From a structural standpoint, an autoperformance is usually presented in a monologue form; the text of the monologue is first spontaneously created by the performer from "an outline of key words and phrases"³³ and then written down later. Gray's early autoperformances were collaborative efforts which involved performance scores developed over a lengthy rehearsal process. In the early stages of his experiments with form, scores and rehearsals were necessary to insure a sense of structure formerly provided by the use of text. As

Gray's experiments with form progressed, style inevitably replaced structure as the strongest element of cohesion, and the score gave way to spontaneous free association.

The process of work which finally led Gray to discover his own personal style of performance was long and varied. It consisted of ten years of training and work in the traditional theatre, followed by several additional years of training and work in experimental theatre as a member of The Performance Group. Gray credits his work with Schechner as the most formative influence on his development of an individual performance style. Gray had always felt uncomfortable with the technical demands of traditional acting; he was never able, in his own terms, to breach the emotional gaps between himself as the performer and the character he was acting. According to Gray, his work with The Performance Group allowed him to "drop the roles" and come back to himself. Schechner's distinction between "acting" and "performing" freed Gray to be himself while performing the acts of the character.³⁴

Richard Schechner . . . emphasized the performer, making him more than, or as important as, the text . . . he was a liberator from assembly line acting techniques. . . . The way that I interpreted Schechner's theories was I was free to do what I wanted, be who I was, and trust that the text would give this freedom a structure. . . . This was liberating for me because it allowed me to be more creative.³⁵

Because of his work with the group, Gray began to question not only his own work as a performer but also many of the traditional assumptions on which acting itself was based. Gray's first important discovery in this questioning process was that "text and action could exist separately and be understood"; with this realization, he began to

question the necessity of "enacting a role" at all. These general dilemmas led Gray to a series of more personal questions revolving around his identity and function as a performer. Questions like the following represented Gray's initial formulation of a personal performance dialectic:

What was it I actually did when I acted? Was I, in fact, acting, all the time, and was my acting in the theatre the surface showing of that? Was my theatre acting a confession of the constant state of feeling my life as an act? What was the reality of myself on the other side of that "act?"³⁶

These "identity questions" provided an energy source for Gray's work. The possibilities they raised, along with Gray's sense that acting was essentially a "lie," began to resolve themselves into a personal tension from which action could evolve.

The conflict between acting (active interpretation) and non-acting (just doing the actions) created a new thesis, a new "act." The separation I had experienced in theatre previous to this was transformed into a kind of Gestalt. . . . It was a dialectic between my life and theatre rather than between role and text.³⁷

As Gray continued to explore this dialectic between his life reality and his theatrical reality, he discovered the beginning of a deeper "confrontation between self and other" which led him to a need to explore this "other" in himself. Gray began to investigate this "other" within the framework of his own actions, and he concluded that his "other" took the form of a "constant witness," a "constant consciousness of myself."³⁸ This continual state of self-awareness was sometimes encountered in the body as a sensory, subjective experience and sometimes in the mind as a rational, objective experience.

In an aesthetic sense, Gray was coming to terms with himself as potential dualities of content and form; the self was the shapeless content out of which the conscious witness emerged as form.

Now there was the new space between the timeless, poetic me (the me in quotes, the self as poem) and the real-time self in the world (the time-bound, mortal self; the self as prose). The ongoing "play" became a play about theatrical transcendence. . . . The play was the movement in and out of those two realities.³⁹

Gray was quite literally evolving an aesthetic in which life became the imitator of art. He was living his life with the objective of making an artistic form out of its diverse aspects. Experience alone was no longer sufficient as action; instead, Gray required a truth deeper than experience--the creation of an artistic life form which offered a more immediate and meaningful experience of the self.

Richard Schechner describes the action of Gray's performance process in "Rumstick Road" as the creation of a "wholemask."

The presence of the performer implies, promises, the presence of the "whole" person. . . . Whole [equals] all, person [equals] mask: and that's what [Rumstick Road] gives: the wholemask rather than the mask as further cut (up/off) by a plot invented by an author. . . . I ask: what is a "wholemask"? It is . . . to make art out of the living tissue of the performer, to accept the body of the performer as a signal (a semiotics of flesh): . . . an approach that uses affective stuff--words, gestures, pictures, artifacts from "real life"--as moves in a dance: . . . made of many images all adapted from everyday behavior, but cleaned up, made exact, tilted a little off-center, and in rhythmic terms, made into a dance . . . the distance without the urge to action outside and/or after the theatre.⁴⁰

Two of Schechner's insights into Gray's work are of particular interest. Schechner implies that Gray's work reflects a strong Brechtian influence. Without Brecht's anarchistic overtones, Gray's own descriptions of his process, as well as his mention of his role as

Swiss Cheese in Mother Courage as marking a turning point in his own work, seem to validate this inference. Gray seems to have adopted Brecht's thesis that human action is historically determined and consequently subject to change and improvement, as well as Brecht's belief that man has the opportunity to choose his acts and through his choices "attain a . . . consistent and meaningful identity."⁴¹ Gray has personally succeeded in realizing the Brechtian objective of demonstrating himself as a process rather than as a character defined and limited by a fixed pattern of actions.

Schechner's other insight, his use of dance as a metaphor for the aesthetic qualities of Gray's work, is provocative because Gray himself continually refers to his work more in painterly terms than in dramatic terms. He describes the shifting process of interaction between his prosaic self and his poetic self in terms of a figure-ground relationship. The figure shape or positive value is used by Gray to define his performance self (himself becoming form), and the negative or ground shape becomes "the contingency of every-day reality out of which this timeless . . . figure"⁴² develops.

In painting "the artist must consider both positive and negative shapes simultaneously and as equally important to the effectiveness of an image . . . with shifts in awareness these shapes trade places or pop back and forth."⁴³ This process is analogous to Gray's: a description of the dynamics of Gray's monologues substantiates this comparison of processes. The monologues are described as multi-dimensional in their overlap of realities; in terms of style, they are impressionistic.

All weave back and forth in time and place--tapestries of of intertwining themes and images, only occasionally revealing a strand of sequential narrative.⁴⁴

Gray's work can be viewed as a series of self-portraits in the cubistic style, offering different personal realities through subtle shifts in perspective.

How to make frames, to frame the mass of reality. I saw this as an act of composition. I thought of myself as performer/composer because this interplay from which these sets of actions grew did not necessarily take the form of text but more often took the form of a conglomerate of images, sounds, colors, and movements.⁴⁵

Gray appears not only to have developed a personal style of performance in which he alone is the total theatre experience, but he has also developed a style which appears to incorporate a multitude of artistic processes within a broadly defined theatrical context.

The mechanism which shifts both Gray and his audience from one state of awareness to another is action--action as spontaneous choice arising from experiential associations. The action of Gray's work seems to be predicated on the interaction of two basic choice-making processes. A moral choice provides the essential impulse informing Gray's work; his objective is total artistic and personal honesty. Don Shewey, who has reviewed most all of Gray's work, observes that "the difficulty others have attesting to their own experience underscores the moral dimension of Gray's self-exploration."⁴⁶ The social choice-making process is reflected in his desire to give value to conventional acts, to discover in the social process an archetypal dimension which can be recognized as valid by his contemporaries.

Summary

The mask in the acting process is the means for transforming the actor into an image of the essential human reality which characterizes a given period. As the nature of this human essence changes, so does the mask. In all periods, the mask focuses the actor's energy by giving shape to the impulses which he eventually carries into action. The nature of the action in each period determines how much of the actor is revealed through the mask as well as what dimension(s) of the actor are illuminated. The mask does, indeed, as André Gide has observed, become more opaque when the human essence it reflects is masked by hypocrisy. Because today's theatre contains a diverse spectrum of different kinds of masks, the Contemporary actor is, as Robert Benedetti has pointed out, free to choose the mask of action through which he wishes to explore some dimension of himself.

An analysis of the mask as an acting convention reveals it to be a significant element of transformation in all approaches to acting. The different processes which have developed to create the different kinds of masks reveal special kinds of relationships between the performer and the character's mask of actions.

The actor creates the Classical mask through a mimetic process: by means of his sympathetic alignment with the dynamics of the action, the actor is transformed into something greater than himself. The mimetic process is sensory and calls for the actor to build the mask from his deepest visceral impulses. The mimetic process projects the actor as a mask-wearer; the actor's objective is to act in harmony with

the fixed mask of character action as it is directly presented through the text. As a mask-wearer, the actor extends a single aspect of his own reality to meet the needs of the character's simple choice-making process. The actor attempts to experience the character's action independent of his own personal experience; in this way, the actor grows to the mask.

The actor creates the Modern mask through a process of transformation: through his capacity to assume and reject a variety of character masks, the actor becomes many different "others." In this sense, the actor functions as a mask-maker. The role-playing which characterizes this particular process retains the sensory features of the mimetic process, but more significantly calls for the actor to build the masks of the character from a variety of different kinds of choices.

The actor's potential for choice-making is embodied in the subtextual level of the play. The subtextual level represents the actor's loss of character mask and a consequent exposure of the actor's personal reality. At the subtextual level, the actor is free to make choices based on his own subjective experience of the action. In this way, the actor grows within the mask of character.

The performer creates the Contemporary mask through a process of actualization. In the process of actualizing himself, the performer functions as his own mask. In building a mask of himself, the performer confronts his own personal masks as he discovers them in the character. In this process, the performer chooses how he will

function: in one moment he may choose to function as an image-maker, while in the next, he may choose to function as a choice-maker.

The process of actualizing creates a new dimension for the textual action; this new dimension, the surtext, projects the performer's personal perspective on the character's action. Because the surtextual level represents the performer's extension beyond character, it demonstrates the performer's choice to reject the mask of character. Autoperformance is a mode of personal mask-making which represents an extreme extension of the process of actualizing. In this process, the performer creates a mask entirely from his own resources. Essentially he creates himself as character. The nature of the mask's action in this process involves a splitting of the performer into potential dualities of "self" (that aspect of the performer which acts) and "other" (that aspect of the performer which witnesses the act). Through a confrontation between these two aspects of himself, the performer creates a new image of himself. This new image objectifies the performer's acts from an artistic perspective. The mask created in this process is called a wholemask because it has the potential to reflect any and all of the performer's own personal reality.

The mask's development as different kinds of conventions for the projection of action inevitably reflects the essential function of the mask to be a gesture toward character. The mask as action aspires toward different images of character. These images might be conceived and fixed by the dramatist, or they might be chosen by the performer and developed spontaneously within the context of the performance event. Regardless of who conceives the image or of how it is conveyed,

the mask as action enables its wearer to experience his own potential for character.

Notes

- ¹Benedetti, Actor At Work, p. 264.
- ²Harrop and Epstein, p. 6.
- ³Benedetti, Seeming, Being and Becoming, p. 24.
- ⁴Ibid., p. 84.
- ⁵Harrop and Epstein, p. 80.
- ⁶Ibid., p. 31.
- ⁷Ibid., p. 80.
- ⁸Ibid., p. 29.
- ⁹Ibid., p. 81.
- ¹⁰Ibid., p. 32.
- ¹¹Benedetti, Actor At Work, pp. 235-236.
- ¹²Ibid., p. 235.
- ¹³Esslin, Reflections, p. 51.
- ¹⁴Ibid., p. 52.
- ¹⁵Jean Benedetti, Stanislavski: An Introduction (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1982), p. 30.
- ¹⁶Constantin Stanislavski, Building A Character, Trans. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood (London: Methuen, 1968), p. 30.
- ¹⁷Sonia Moore, The Stanislavski System: The Professional Training Of An Actor, 3d ed. (Viking Press, Penguin Books, 1965), p. 13.
- ¹⁸Moore, p. 22.
- ¹⁹Stanislavski, p. 114.
- ²⁰Stanislavski, p. 113.
- ²¹Benedetti, Actor At Work, p. 214.
- ²²Robert Cohen and John Harrop, Creative Play Direction (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1974), p. 7.

²³Benedetti, Seeming, Being and Becoming, p. 46.

²⁴Elinor Fuchs, "The Death of Character," Theatre Communications 5. (March 1983): 4.

²⁵Ibid., p. 2.

²⁶Richard Schechner and Mady Schuman, ed., Ritual, Play and Performance: Readings in the Social Sciences/Theatre (New York: The Seabury Press, 1976), p. 207.

²⁷Richard Schechner, The End of Humanism: Writings on Performance (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982), p. 20.

²⁸American Dreams: The Imagination of Sam Shepard, ed. Bonnie Marranca (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1981), p. 26.

²⁹Schechner, End of Humanism, p. 82.

³⁰Marranca, p. 26.

³¹Benedetti, Seeming, Being and Becoming, p. 94.

³²Michael Kirby, Introduction to "About Three Places in Rhode Island," by Spalding Gray The Drama Review 23 (March 1979): 2.

³³Don Shewey, "The Year of Spalding Famously," Village Voice, November 13, 1984, pp. 99 & 107.

³⁴Spalding Gray, "About Three Places in Rhode Island," The Drama Review 23 (March 1979): 32.

³⁵Ibid., pp. 32-33.

³⁶Ibid, p. 33.

³⁷Ibid., p. 33.

³⁸Ibid, p. 35.

³⁹Ibid., pp. 33-34.

⁴⁰Schechner, End of Humanism, p. 84.

⁴¹Lyons, p. 15.

⁴²Gray, "Rhode Island", p. 33.

⁴³Duane Preble and Sarah Preble, Art Forms 2d ed., (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978), pp. 54-55.

⁴⁴James Leverett, Introduction to "Swimming To Cambodia," by Spalding Gray American Theatre 1 (February, 1985): 6.

⁴⁵Gray, "Rhode Island," p. 34.

⁴⁶Shewey, "Spalding Famously," p. 107.

CHAPTER III

THE MASK OF ACTION AS A CRITICAL GESTURE TOWARD CHARACTER

In its various conventional forms, the mask projects action as a critical gesture toward character. In each convention, the mask formulates a different dialectic of human potential. The actor, through different kinds of choice-making processes, seeks to resolve the dialectical tensions formulated by the mask. The performer's act of choosing involves him in a self-critical process which allows him to experience a state of character in the ethical sense.

At its most essential level, the mask in action functions as a critical gesture. The action of the mask is critical in its capacity to formulate a spectrum of dialectical tensions which precipitate choice. As a symbol of otherness, the mask inevitably implies the existence of contradictory possibilities which, in terms of character development, represent potential states of self-awareness. At the level of character, these double representations of consciousness are resolved into a single state of self-awareness; that is, the condition of character is to be aware of oneself as an embodiment of dualities and, at the same time, to act at a critical distance from--or at a mid-point between--these dualities. In terms of character development these conflicting human potentialities can be seen to function separately on two planes of action. The most obvious plane

of action is informed by a tension between the character and the world of the play which he inhabits. A less obvious, but more fundamental, plane of action is developed through a tension between the actor and the text/context. During a performance, both planes of action interact to influence the creation of a character mask.

In The Dynamics of Drama, Bernard Beckerman develops the concept that dramatic structure is itself a mask based on double representations. Beckerman views the interaction between character and play world as analogous to a figure/ground relationship. According to Beckerman, these double representations of figure (character) and ground (world of the play) function in the same manner as a metaphor: one representation provides an original insight while the other representation imparts a conventional meaning.

When a playwright first constructs a play, the world of his action is usually the world of the audience--either the actual, physical world or, more likely and essentially, the social, psychological, and moral world. In these instances we may say that the two grounds of action overlap . . . the background of action may take many forms, but, in general we can distinguish two contradictory tendencies. The background can represent communal values with which the dramatist is in accord and which he confirms sympathetically in the working out of his action. In contrast, the background can represent values which the action is calculated to attack, directly or indirectly. . . . In every play, the writer presumes a background which he shocks or reconfirms. Schematically speaking, we can say that dramatic action plays off the backboard of social and psychological values and customs, which even if sketched in lightly or merely assumed, are always present.¹

Beckerman views the values represented by the background as a frame for the character's choices (or vice versa), a frame which either throws the character into relief or absorbs him into the background. The more selectively the dramatic background is framed, the more

particularized becomes the ethic informing the character's action. The scope of the background, as well as its particular nature, strongly influences the success or failure of the character's action: the broader the scope of the background, the less effective is the character's gesture to break out of the frame or to validate his choices.

From an ethical perspective, the figure/ground relationship can be seen as a critical interaction between the character's moral stance and the play world's code of behavior. Through this critical interaction, three general kinds of tensions, which correspond to the three basic kinds of character masks, are developed: 1) the Classical mask is predicated on a tension between the individual ethic and a cosmic order; 2) the Modern mask is predicated on a tension between the individual and the family or state ethic; and 3) the Contemporary mask is predicated on a tension between the artistic ethic and the non-valuative collective.

The broadly framed Classical background is generally characterized by a dynamic ideality against which the individual attempts to fix a subjective code of behavior. The more narrowly framed modern background is generally characterized by a system of fixed, conventional values against which the individual posits a relatively more dynamic value. The contemporary background is at once selectively and essentially framed as a purely theatrical context. Without the action of the performer, this context is characterized as intrinsically valueless. Within this wholly artificial context, the

Contemporary performer attempts to create values of an immediate and authentic nature.

In all periods of theatre, the choices which characterize the character and his background are, like the broader tensions themselves, only potentialities without the presence of the actor. Through his initiation of choice-making processes, the actor attempts to resolve these tensions inherent in the dramatic structure. The actor's choice-making processes create a new plane of action which generates its own double representations.

The dualities arising from the actor's choice-making process also vary according to the different kinds of character masks being created. In his creation of a Classical character mask, the actor places himself in tension with the play as a whole. In his creation of a Modern character mask, the actor places himself in tension with the text of the play. Finally, in his creation of a Contemporary character mask, the performer places himself in tension with the performance context.

Each of the various kinds of character masks is developed through different kinds of processes which, in different ways, unite the two planes of action. From the actor's point of view, the Classical mask develops through a process which is best characterized as submergent. In this process, identity is projected through a progressive assimilation of the actor's consciousness by the character's consciousness and ultimately by the mythic consciousness embodied in the action as a whole. This assimilation of potentials develops through a series of ritualistic acts which are mimetically

analogous to the hierarchical ordering of man in the universe. In this process, the individual ethic is absorbed by the greater moral value just as a fixed, particularized consciousness is assimilated by a universally dynamic consciousness. The submergent process is necessarily simplistic, developing its connections between the actor and the action through a single choice-making process.

The Modern mask develops a process in which identity is projected as emergent. A new consciousness emerges from a series of transactions between the actor and the text. This process, from which the actor emerges as character through his encounter with the text, is analogous to the emergence of the individual from the formal confines of a social context. Through this transformational process, a more universal and dynamic individual ethic evolves from the particularized and fixed values of a segment of society. The emergent process is complex, requiring a multiplicity of choice-making processes obliquely functioning on both planes of action simultaneously. It is the actor's responsibility to instill the Modern character with his ethical substance (his motive), for without the actor, the character is only a succession of appearances, lacking both substance and value.

The identity projected by the Contemporary mask develops out of a convergent process. A new consciousness is actualized through a series of confrontations between the actor and the performance elements. The convergent process creates theatrical contexts capable of eliciting an ethical dimension. This intrinsically theatrical process is analogous to the natural processes of collaboration which, through conversion, evolve into identifiable life patterns. The value

elicited through the creation of a given theatrical context has no validity outside itself. Instead, the value derived is synonymous with the function of the collaboration. The emphasis in the contemporary process is on the creation of acts which engender value, rather than on the identification of values which provoke action.

Finally, the two planes of action which characterize the mask have traditionally been informed by different visions of human potentiality. The Classical mask is informed by an apollonian/dionysian vision of human potentiality. Within this essentially spiritual vision, the actor functions as the creative dionysian energy, and the structure of the action functions as the rational, apollonian energy in which is embodied the potential for form. As these two kinds of elemental energies merge, the dionysian tendencies of the actor are purged by the aesthetic powers of the structured action. Through his encounter with the action, the actor literally transcends himself and moves into a state of character. The action of the play allows the actor to explore and experience his own potential for ethical substance; at the same time, he is urged by the passion which animates the structure to use his creative energies to act against the disciplined nature of the action which seeks to shape him. Because the power of form supercedes the passion of the actor, the Classical mask is representative of the playwright's vision of reality.

In the Modern character mask the double representations are informed by a vision of man's potential for truth and appearance. Actually the Modern vision is nothing more than a progressive extension

of the Classical vision, for the unifying formal tendencies of the Classical apollonian vision are perceived by the modernist as illusory and therefore unreal. From a Modern perspective, man's permanent condition is one of fragmentation and, because unity in the Modern world can only be attained through artifice, man must continually act to counter his desire for communality. In terms of the reality/appearance tension, the actor functions as the force of reality while the text functions as the force of appearance. Ultimately, the actor, as the force of reality, is reincarnated in a more substantial form through his encounter with the realm of appearance as it is reflected in the text of the play. Within this more materialistic vision of human potential, the actor provides the ethical substance which transforms the mask of the text into an image of character. Because the dramatic form is given life by the passion of the actor, the Modern mask is representative of both the actor's and the playwright's visions.

The Contemporary mask offers the proposition that a truly authentic vision of human potential must account for the existence of contradictory possibilities. From a contemporary point of view, form is relative and differs according to the individual who perceives it. This Romantic notion of man as a composition of contrasting tendencies can be considered as an even more extreme extension of the Classical vision; it views the modernist distinction between illusion and reality as fundamentally arbitrary. The essential dialectical tensions of this vision of man as potentially authentic are the natural and the artificial. From a theatrical perspective, everything in the

performance context, including the actor, has the potential through interaction to become something other than it appears to be. Through changes in the structure and the style of the action, the actor (as well as other performance elements) can be perceived in one moment as natural and, in the next moment, as artificial. The Contemporary mask is representative of the artist's vision of his own potentialities; it is a wholemask because the entire spectrum of human potential can be framed within it at any given moment.

In the broadest sense, the wholemask created by the Contemporary performer symbolizes a primary reality. The function of a wholemask is analogous to the function of a transformer: through it, the actor's impulses are transformed, constantly changed from one energy state to another. Richard Schechner has described this process of constantly shifting impulses in a reference to the transformational persona created by Gray in performance: "he is both 'real' and 'performed,' 'private' and 'public,' 'natural' and 'artificial.'" ² This transformation of the actor's impulses occurs through the action of performance. Contemporary performance action implies no level of meaning beyond itself; it is strictly framed as an act. The act is concerned with making connections and relationships to, and with, other elements of the performance context. Unity is not an objective of the performance action, but there is the Romantic objective of a "harmony of contraries." ³

The more essentialized and all-encompassing nature of the wholemask allows the performer to locate himself in a middle ground relationship between the performance reality and the audience reality.

In this position, he functions as a mediator between these two newly generated potentialities which may also be classified according to the natural/artificial tension. The assumption underlying the creation of a wholemask is that all things are connected and that the actor is the conducting agent. In this way the actor uses the performance to construct primary connections between himself and the performance context and between himself and the audience.

Richard Schechner's description of how the Contemporary performance process functions directly illuminates the potential for a broad application of the Contemporary mask to the character masks of more traditional theatre.

One of the truly fine things to come from the high-energy experimental period now ended is the recognition that theatricality is among the primary human activities. It is not a mirror, but something basic in itself. Theatricality doesn't imitate or derive from other human social behavior, but exists side-by-side with them in a weave. Theatre doesn't do politics as Beck and Malina think; it doesn't do ordinary behavior as Stanislavski thought; it doesn't do ritual as Grotowski believed in his "holiday" phase. Theatricality is a process braided into these other processes. It is our job . . . to investigate the multiplex weaves we can obtain by braiding these basic human social behaviors. The same event can be political, ordinary, ritualized and theatrical.⁴

Schechner's insights into the nature of theatricality as a primary process have far-reaching implications for the wholemask to function as a convention of style. The wholemask has the capacity to develop new perspectives on the professed function of the dramatic and performance processes of the past. In a fashion similar to the Modern playwright, the Contemporary actor can, through his creation of a wholemask, utilize the character's action as a background which "he shocks or reconfirms."⁵

The Contemporary actor's mask can transform the character action of any dramatic text into a process which has contemporary relevance. The Contemporary actor can accomplish this transformation by transposing the natural dialectic of a given character mask into a broader, more purely theatrical tension between the natural and the artificial. In this fashion, character action in any period can be reconstructed as vitally authentic; it can be performed from the dual perspectives of what it does, and of what it can but does not do. For example, the Contemporary mask can reveal the social behavior of the Modern character from a political perspective. The Contemporary mask can revitalize the action of the Modern character within its natural, conventional context as a socializing force, and it can create a new critical dimension for the action as a political force. Because the latter dimension is not indigenous to the work, it is, on the one hand, a necessarily artificial imposition; but from a contemporary point of view, it has the potential to create an immediate context for the character action, offering a more authentic perspective.

The authentic ideal of the Contemporary mask impels the Contemporary actor to assume a sense of social and artistic responsibility through his creation of a choice-making process. Today's performer not only defines himself through the mask he creates, but he also uses the mask to reveal the potentialities of the world around him. In this larger sense, the Contemporary performer functions as a critic. Self-criticism is inherent in his choice-making capacity.

The Contemporary mask is an embodiment of the actor's vision of possibilities for the formulation of his own action. In creating his

mask, the actor may explore choice-making processes which are singularly social, moral, political, psychological, or he may choose to be pluralistic in his exploration of processes. Regardless of how he chooses to explore his potential for action, the actor is continually working to create his own character--his own mode of understanding the world through action.

In creating an authentic mask of personal actions, the Contemporary performer must be aware that the actions in which he chooses to participate are uniquely different kinds of critical gestures toward character. The Contemporary performer is also free to draw on the discoveries made by Artaud, Brecht, Grotowski and Schechner in their experimental approaches to the acting process. The actor must create his mask at the point where he can connect to the character's natural pre-disposition toward the larger action, as well as his own natural disposition toward the character's potential as an aesthetic form. The way in which the actor accomplishes this alignment will differ from period to period and from character to character, but it may be hypothesized here using the three fundamental kinds of character mask.

In his reconstruction of a Classical character mask, the actor is not only verifying the significance of his own cultural identity, but also confronting the contemporary absence of universal values. In developing his process of Classical reconstruction, the actor can benefit immensely from the insights of Artaud and Grotowski. Both of these theorists have provided the actor with the contemporary means for revitalizing mythic potential. In particular, Artaud has shown the

actor the significance of re-discovering the "performable rhythm[s] of life and action which may still touch us."⁶ Grotowski, on the other hand, has developed methods to aid the performer in using the myth as a springboard for his own discoveries. The Contemporary actor's approach to the reconstruction of a Classical mask can be celebratory, as the actor discovers his potential to become a civilizing force; and it can be transgressive, as he discovers his capacity to become a blaspheming force. As a civilizing force, the actor seizes on those impulses which he still recognizes as culturally dynamic within his own world. This discovery of his own mythic consciousness will naturally result in the desire to participate mimetically in those ritual acts with which he can identify. Through his participation in these acts of a larger significance, the actor not only extends his cultural identity, but also the cultural dimensions of his audience.

As a blasphemous force, the actor creates a new perspective on the action. His confrontation with the myth involves a "testing of whatever is a traditional value."⁷ Through his transgressive action, the actor can objectify, or frame, his acts by lifting them to the level of ritual as ritual, having no immediate purpose other than the performative one. Through his objectification, the actor directly illuminates the artificiality of the act from a contemporary point of view. Finally, the actor can formulate his own performance objective out of the actual dialectical tensions which attend his creation of a Classical mask. On the one hand, the actor, like the character, must want to experience his potential to become something greater than he is. On the other hand, the actor must need to account for his failure

to perform a character radically distanced from his own experience of reality.

The actor creating a Modern mask must realize that he is essentially involved in a socializing process, the contemporary counterpoint to which is the political process. The actor's mask can become a socio/political gesture prompted by the actor's need both to affirm the freedom of the individual from manipulation by such a context and to experience the nurturing potential of such a context.

It is not merely coincidental that Stanislavski's methodology is based on a foundation of artistic ethics. Stanislavski realized that Modern character action was fundamentally concerned with values of a predominantly social nature. Stanislavski's emphasis on the role of action in creating the Modern character mask was an attempt to develop the actor's ability to provoke change and to adapt to and grow through changes in the world in which he acted. In developing his capacity to act on his choices, the performer is engaged in a process which directly impacts the development of his own character.

In particular, Stanislavski's methods have provided the actor with many of the tools necessary to realize his personal potential as a socializing force. Such tools as communion and adaptation are obvious techniques for helping the actor to develop skills of interaction and compromise. Even the elements of imagination and emotion memory, which require the actor to cultivate a sympathetic understanding of human behavior other than his own, are ways of extending the actor's own capacity for social awareness.

In realizing himself as a political force, the Contemporary

actor should look to the theories of Bertolt Brecht, whose methodologies were catalyzed by the social excesses of the Modern theatre. Brecht's suggested technique of revealing alternative choices to character action will enable the actor to experience his own anarchistic energies. In demonstrating that the Modern character freely chooses his acts from a spectrum of possibilities, the actor debunks those social conventions which no longer promote conviction in contemporary society. Finally, the actor can distance himself from the multiple social masks of the character by showing how he uses them to accomodate the shifting circumstances of his world. Particularly at the subtextual level, where the character loses his own mask, the actor is free to create other possibilities for the character, for himself, and for the audience.

In his formulation of a mask of actions, the Contemporary performer is essentially developing his own character; at the same time, he is projecting himself as an immediate image of the contemporary vision. This vision is projected through a mask created from the potential dualities of the performance context and the audience. The performer's acts are separated from the reality of the text, as well as from the real world of the audience, but they are engendered from his encounters with both potentialities.

In his creation of a wholemask, the performer has at his disposal a richly diverse dramatic and theatrical heritage from which to select his actions and processes. The actor will most authentically project himself through the way in which he patterns his choices; the patterns which reflect in his mask will, in turn, project his sense of

artistic integrity.

Summary

The mask as action functions critically in the sense that it always represents a gesture toward character. The vision of character projected by the action of the mask will vary according to the different visions of human potential which inform a given historical period. The action of the mask projects a sense of character through its capacity to formulate recognizable patterns of ethical behavior. These patterns evolve from a variety of choice-making processes.

The different visions of character projected by the mask are realized through different kinds of theatrical processes which, in turn, exhibit different tensions between the character and his world and between the character and the performer. The vision of character conveyed by the mask is always projected as a dialectic of human potentials.

The gesture toward character projected by the Classical mask is idealistic in nature: all tensions resolve themselves in the direction of an ideal which is external to both the reality of the character and the performer. The Classical gesture seeks a unity of emotive and rational energies; it is a gesture away from static individuation and toward a dynamic universality. The Classical gesture is sensory in its appeal.

The gesture toward character projected by the Modern mask is Realistic in nature: it seeks to harmonize, rather than resolve tensions. This process partially accounts for the realities of both the character and the performer. Each of these two potentials are

shown as fragmented. In this process, only the individual is dynamic; the universal, which has become particularized, is shown to be static.

The gesture toward character projected by the Contemporary mask is authentic in nature: it makes no attempt either to resolve or stabilize natural tensions. The action elicited by this process is aharmonic and fully accounts for the realities of both the character and the performer. The Contemporary gesture is toward a diversity of performance energies. In this process, everything is potentially dynamic.

More than any other mask, the contemporary wholemask has the potential to function as a critical gesture. Because it develops from the most primary tensions, it can be used to provide critical perspectives on works of the past. The freedom of choice that is accorded the performer in his creation of a wholemask enables him to determine his own character.

Notes

¹Bernard Beckerman, Dynamics of Drama: Theory and Method of Analysis (New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1979), pp. 139-141.

²Schechner, End of Humanism, p. 83.

³Victor Hugo, "Preface to Cromwell," European Theories of the Drama ed. Barrett H. Clarke (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1972), p. 363.

⁴Schechner, End Of Humanism, pp. 72-73.

⁵Beckerman, Dynamics, p. 141.

⁶Francis Fergusson, The Idea of a Theatre: A Study of Ten Plays (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 10.

⁷Grotowski, Poor Theatre, p. 122.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

The mask functions as a critical tool for an examination of character and performer action in all periods of theatre, including the most recent. The mask has developed as a convention for the projection of action in four basic ways: 1) as a theatrical convention; 2) as a dramatic convention; 3) as a performance convention; and 4) as an acting convention. Each of these conventions develops action from a different perspective, through different means, and on different levels of the dramatic and theatrical process. At the same time, all of these mask conventions necessarily project action as arising from a dialectical interaction of human potentialities. These various conventions also demonstrate a general progression from an exclusive focus on the projection of character action to an exclusive focus on the projection of performer action.

The Mask as a Theatrical Convention

The mask as a theatrical convention is principally concerned with the projection of character action, though in its latter stages of development, it also accounts for the action of the performer. As a theatrical convention, the mask functions symbolically as a direct objectification of character action. The human dialectic symbolized by the mask exists as a tension between the individual, as represented by

the dramatic character, and the cosmic order, as represented by the action as a whole.

The extensive development of the mask as a theatrical convention can be examined most accurately through an analysis of its extremes. In the earliest phases of its development as a theatrical convention, the mask objectifies character as a fixed impulse. Character is fixed by a series of ritualistic acts which reflect a simplistic choice-making process. Both act and choice are necessarily limited to project a reality of individual human limitation as opposed to a cosmic dynamism.

Change in the mask primarily occurs as revelation or discovery. Through his discoveries, the character confronts himself as an imposter--as a mask-wearer. The character discovers that a discrepancy exists between his personal reality and his public acts. Acts of revelation result in a gradual loss of individual definition in the character's mask; this loss of personal definition prompts his absorption into the larger mask of action. In this way, character is gradually revealed through action. This process of directly explicating character action through a fixed sequence of acts tends to depersonalize the performer who, like the character, loses individual definition as he is subsumed first by the mask of the character and finally by the larger mask of action.

In the later phases of its development as a convention, the mask still presents character as a singularly fixed impulse, but this impulse is given mobility through its greater capacity to influence the action of the whole. The character exerts influence through its

increased potential for choice-making; in particular, the character is free to choose how he will act on his impulse. In the final stages of this convention's development, both act and choice are delimited to project a reality of individual human freedom as opposed to a more closed world order. The different ways in which the character acts reflect different kinds of choice-making processes.

Change in the mask occurs further through intensification. A character's action is given greater dimension through the different ways in which it encounters new circumstances. In his various adjustments to circumstance, the character frequently objectifies his choice of how to act so that his acts function as an external mask--or disguise--of his real impulse. The character's objectification of his acts as a mask allows him more effectively to influence a given situation. Intensification also results in an increasingly finer definition in the mask as various aspects of it, illuminated through different choices, are eventually unified as a whole image. In this way, character grows through action. This more indirect process of explicating character action tends toward a personalization of the actor who, like the character, reveals different aspects of himself through his participation in a variety of choice-making processes.

The Mask as a Dramatic Convention

The mask as a dramatic convention is concerned with a balanced projection of character and performer action. As a dramatic convention, the mask projects action representationally; the mask functions as a representative embodiment of two fundamental visions of human potential. These two visions are exemplified by 1) the

character's action which reflects the reality of a social context, and
2) the performer's action which reflects the reality of the individual.

Character action is presented objectively through the text as a sequence of patterned behavior characterized by its mask-like fixity. Because the character's behavior is consciously modified to accomodate the external demands of the social context, it assumes a quality of appearance or the dimension of a disguise. Character action is basically limited to a single choice-making process; the character's acts are conditioned by social choices.

The performer's action is indirectly developed through subtext as a single psychic impulse which becomes intensified through its encounter with the fixity of the character's masks. The different ways in which the performer chooses to act on his psychic impulse lend dimension to this level of the action. The performer's action is limited in its choice-making potential only by the demands of the character action. Because of its greater flexibility, the performer's action gradually subsumes the character's action, and a new mask emerges.

Change in the mask occurs through the tension between the character's and the performer's different choice-making processes. Both revelation and intensification as a means of change have been incorporated into different choice-making processes: revelation functions as part of the moral choice-making process and intensification functions as an integral part of the psychological choice-making process. Through this process, the performer is

personalized, but the character is depersonalized as the mask takes on more and more of the subtextual reality.

The Mask as a Performance Convention

The mask as a performance convention is concerned with the projection of a performer's action. As a performance convention, the mask has been developed according to four different kinds of processes. These processes have resulted in fundamentally different kinds of performance masks: 1) the mask as sign; 2) the mask as essence; 3) the mask as demonstration; and 4) the mask as actual. As a performance convention, the mask presents action imagistically: fragments of character are offered here and there, but never as a unified or fixed whole. The dialectic imaged in the mask is between the performer's potential for character and the performance collectives' potential for meaninglessness. The performer projects his potential for character only when he creates a perspective on the motiveless action of the performance context.

Each of these different approaches has developed the performer's action as a dialectical tension between a single essential impulse of the performer and his various personal masks as reflected in the text. The mask as sign involves a confrontation between the performer's physical essence and his other personal masks. The mask as essence involves a confrontation between the performer's moral essence and his other various masks. The mask as demonstration involves a confrontation between the performer's social essence and his other personal masks. Finally, the mask as actual involves a confrontation

between all of the performer's various personal masks in an attempt to create a more authentic personal mask.

Each of the different kinds of performance masks is developed as a single, extended choice-making process which illuminates and develops a single, significant aspect of the performer's character. The performer's action is to create a consistent choice-making process through his encounters with the performance context. Because the new plane of action created by the performer is beyond the scope of the textual action, it can be considered as a kind of surtext.

Change in the mask exists in all of the ways utilized by previous conventions as well as through the overt assumption and rejection of various kinds of masks. In this way, character is created through the performance action. The different performance masks tend to personalize or depersonalize the performer at different stages of the performance action, depending on the nature of the perspective evolved through a given encounter.

The Mask as an Acting Convention

Several acting processes have been developed to support the various mask conventions mentioned above. Each process is a unique attempt to develop a means for realizing the different kinds of actions projected by each convention. Each of these acting processes develops a different kind of dialectical tension between the performer and the mask.

The tension between the actor and the mask as a theatrical convention is a complementary kind of tension: the actor works to harmonize his impulse with the impulse objectified by the mask. In

this process, the actor is a mask-wearer in the sense that he objectifies some part of himself into a state of mask-like fixity. That portion of himself which the actor objectifies is determined and fixed by the text of the play he is performing.

As a mask-wearer, the actor engages in a process which will enable him to merge with the mask of the text. The actor aligns himself with the text through a mimetic process: he develops a sensory sympathy with the dynamics of the character's ritualistic acts. The mimetic process involves the actor in a single choice-making process.

The tension between the performer and the mask as a dramatic convention is both harmonic and confrontational. In this process, the actor harmonizes certain of his impulses with those objectified by the mask. At the same time, the performer also confronts the conditioned reflexes of the mask with his deepest, most authentic impulses. Fundamentally, the actor engages in a process of give and take with the mask of the text.

The process through which the actor interacts with the masks of the text is a transformational process; through his exploration of different kinds of choices, the actor transforms the text, and through its fixed demands, the text transforms the actor. By means of his transformations, the actor functions as a mask-maker in that he reveals the character to be a wearer of masks.

The tension between the performer and the mask as a performance convention involves a confrontational kind of tension. In this process, the performer confronts his own personal masks through his encounter with them in the text. Through this confrontational

encounter, the performer hopes to develop a more completely authentic impulse which becomes his performance mask.

The performer's process is one of self-actualization: he creates a mask of himself in that he objectifies some portion of himself. That portion of himself which is objectified as an authentic mask is freely determined by the performer but eventually fixed as a performance score which the performer encounters anew with each performance. By means of his process of actualization, the performer functions as his own mask in that he reveals himself to be a mask-maker.

There are several conclusions which can be drawn from a study of the mask's development as a convention for the projection of action. First, the development of the various mask conventions reveals a definitive pattern with regard to the nature of both the character's and the performer's action. In each of the various conventions, character action is consistently revealed as iconic in its mask-like fixity while performer action is revealed as consistently dynamic. Even in the mask's function as a performance convention, where the performer consciously fixes his action in an attempt to project his potential for character, the performer still remains mobile through his freedom of choice and, more particularly, through his capacity to create a perspective for the action. The emergence of this pattern seems to imply that the most fundamental dialectic for the creation of action is one of fixity in tension with mobility and that the natural tendency of the performer as an element in the theatrical process is in the direction of creative freedom rather than of formal fixity.

Another conclusion which emerges from this study concerns the future viability of the mask as a convention. This study seems to validate the mask as a fundamental element in the development of action: the mask will always function in one form or another as a vital convention for the projection of action. The mask will always remain vital because of its capacity to provide form for the expression of otherwise intangible impulses. As Jerzy Grotowski has suggested, the more intangible the impulses expressed by the performer, the more rigorous must be the form which articulates them. The mask as a convention is flexible enough to accomodate many different kinds of expressions; at the same time, it is conventional enough (by nature of its iconic capacity) to provoke universal recognition of the different images it is capable of conveying.

The evolution of the mask as a convention reflects certain general tendencies which possibly hold important implications for its future development. From the performer's point of view, the tendency of the mask's action is toward an acceptance of formal structure as more properly the creative domain of the performer. The performer's action within the mask's development as a convention progresses from a condition of formal antagonism to one of an affinity for formal stability. From the character's point of view, the tendency of the mask's action is toward freedom from the demands of form. A recognition of these specific tendencies of the mask's action must be coupled with the realization that the general direction of both the character's and the performer's action is one of increased creative freedom.

A study of the mask as a means for projecting action at the performer level has inevitably led to a discussion of the mask's capacity to function as a convention for the projection of style. It has been suggested that the Contemporary mask has the potential to project, from a contemporary point of view, the manner in which the dramatic actions of the past function. Such a revitalization of past actions could be achieved through the performer's use of various performance masks so as to create new perspectives on a character's action.

The general development of the mask as a convention increasingly reflects its capacity to function as a medium for the conveyance of style. In particular, the indeterminate nature of the Contemporary wholemask lends itself more to the function of revealing the how, rather than the what, of both character and performer action. Because the wholemask is essentially theatrical, it has the ability to incorporate and utilize all the various kinds of mask conventions which have preceded its development.

A knowledge of how the mask functions traditionally and dramatically can aid the performer in utilizing the various mask conventions to create situational contexts for the playing out of a given action. A knowledge of how the different kinds of performance masks function can help the performer to create a more authentic personal action.

A study of the mask's development as a convention for the projection of action raises certain questions which demand further consideration. These questions are of a more pragmatic than

theoretical nature; specifically, they are concerned with how the most recent developments in the mask as a performance convention can be realized and applied within a practical context. While Richard Schechner has developed a rather substantial body of theory concerning the mask as a contemporary performance convention, he has yet to develop a significant methodology for carrying his theories into practice. In any case, such methodologies cannot be arbitrarily formulated; instead, they must evolve out of an extensive practical confrontation with the problems occasioned by the process.

Distance is also a critical factor in developing a performance methodology: the further away one gets from a work, the more mask-like becomes the process which carries forward the action. This increased perception of definition in the process of action requires a critical distance which only the passage of time can provide. Within the contemporary framework, the performer's dilemma is always one of discovering the nature of, rather than playing, the mask which projects the action.

This study has generated at least three essential areas of concern which need to be addressed more specifically in order to understand the process by which a wholemask can be created. These areas of concern are: 1) how the performer creates authentic acts; 2) how structure emerges from the process of actualization; and finally, 3) how and in what way value is derived from the natural/artificial dialectic which produces the action. The answers to each of these questions, as well as the questions themselves, have

far-reaching implications for both the Contemporary actor training process and for the nature of the production process itself.

A consideration of how authentic acts emerge through the performer's creation of a performance context for the action must begin with a determination of how the context is created. It seems plausible to assume that the performer's collaborative creation of a context is somewhat similar to the way in which the playwright formerly developed a context for the character's action. However, because the contemporary givens are theatrical actuals rather than imaginary probabilities, the performers must select only those actual givens which will enable them to have an authentic experience of their acts. Such an hypothesis naturally leads to the question of the audience's role with regard to the experience: is it necessary that they also validate the acts as authentic or, because the contemporary experience of action is necessarily indeterminate, is their function simply one of formulating their own perspective according to their own experience? In the only instance of authentic performance to which this study can refer, the performers were undeniably engaged in a self-actualizing process, but many in the audience interpreted the event as artificial.¹ In a very real way, such indeterminacy is thoroughly consistent with the phenomenological perception of truth.

The question of how structure is evolved in this process develops inevitably from the first question. If the performer is responsible for providing a point of view for the action, he inevitably functions as a structuring agent. Grotowski's concept of a performance score seems to be the key to the problem of structure, but no one,

including Grotowski, has satisfactorily defined how a score is developed. Again, because of the need to account for actuals, the creation of a score will probably differ according to the different givens of each performance event. Certain basic elements of a performance score have been established through the experimental work of Grotowski, Schechner and Gray. It is generally accepted that the intent of a score is self-actualization, that the development of a score reflects the culmination rather than the origin of a work process, that the score is a tool for encountering the self rather than a means for re-presenting the self, and finally, that a score must remain flexible so as to encourage spontaneity. However, beyond these very basic principles, there is very little understanding of how the score should be composed by the performer.

Finally, the question as to whether the natural/artificial dialectic has any value outside the performance context needs to be examined. On a basic level, the entire process of building a wholemask seems to be geared toward developing the skills for placing oneself in action generally rather than into actions of a specific kind. Such a performance pretext seems to be more purely humanistic and more broadly functional in real-life contexts than are the performance pretexts of the past. The Contemporary performer's process seems to be informed by a desire to show an audience how to act effectively rather than to show them how they do indeed act.

The implications of these areas of concern for the concepts developed by this study and vice versa are vast. As a body of theory, this study is incomplete until its principles are explored within a

practical context. Such exploration will undoubtedly raise even more questions concerning the viability of the mask as a convention for the explication of both character and performer action. This study of the mask as a critical tool for the examination of character and performer action provides the theoretical groundwork for further explorations into the nature of action.

Note

¹This reference is to a scene from Sam Shepard's Fool for Love which was performed as an Irene Ryan audition at the American College Theatre Festival competition held at the Fort Worth Theatre in Fort Worth, Texas, in January, 1985.

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